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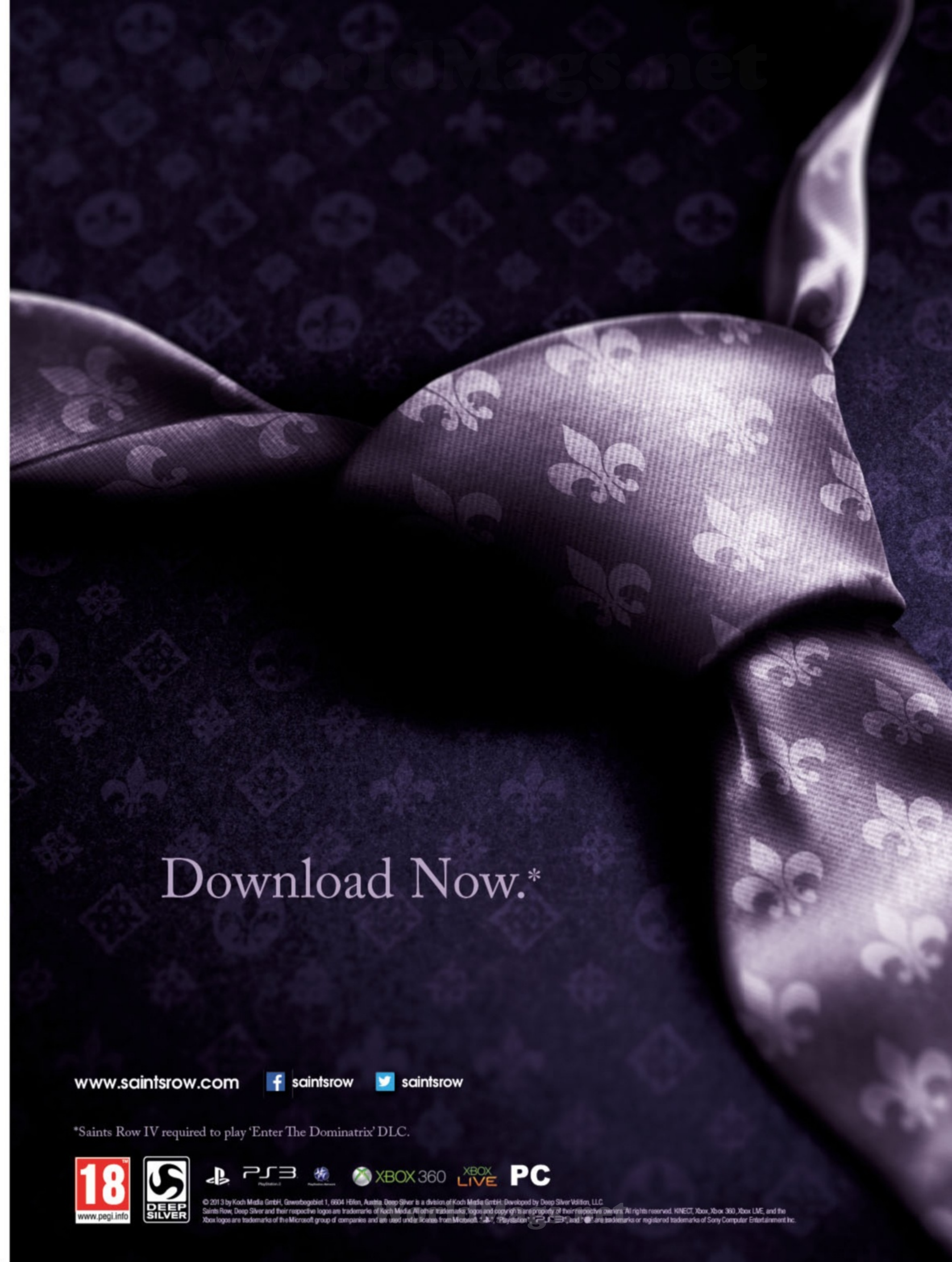
METAL GEAR SOLID V
DEEP DOWN
BEYOND: TWO SOULS
CARD HUNTER
POKÉMON X/Y
SONIC: LOST WORLD



TOKYO GAME SHOW SPECIAL
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HANDS ON WITH THE ACTION-RPG AIMING TO IMPROVE ON PERFECTION

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Enter The Dominatrix

Better technology and interesting videogames

When Hiroshi Yamauchi passed away on September 19, the world of electronic entertainment lost a unique personality. The man who led Nintendo as it emerged to stake its claim as the world's greatest videogame company, he was a no-compromise kind of operator who was bold in both actions and pronouncements, famously saying, "We cannot guarantee interesting videogames just through the use of better technology." It was this kind of thinking that led to the success of Nintendo's Wii, and it resonates today in the company's 2DS console, probably the most backward-looking thing in gaming since Sony's demonstration of its PSP as a virtual wing mirror for a PS3 racing sim. We look at the new Nintendo handheld, along with the bubbling ambitions of Valve in the gaming hardware market, in Knowledge.

Yamauchi's words also come to mind as we weigh up PlayStation 4 and Xbox One as they are readied for launch. Because the battle between these two boxes won't be won on silicon alone, in this issue's features section we set them against each other across multiple categories, from input methods to indie support.

And from a two-way conflict we move on to a contest featuring a much larger field of participants. During the celebrations of our 20th anniversary in August we asked you to vote for the best game that has been released since **Edge** was launched in 1993, and you responded in force. Now that we've recovered from the strain of collating your votes, we can reveal the victor, along with the 19 also-rans, in order of popularity. We won't spoil any of the results on this page, but we have to congratulate you on your refined tastes. (Hey, you're **Edge** readers. We needn't have worried.) Thank you to every single one of you who voted, and well done to Benjamin Pulo, the lucky recipient of a unique box set of **Edge** 20th anniversary editions.







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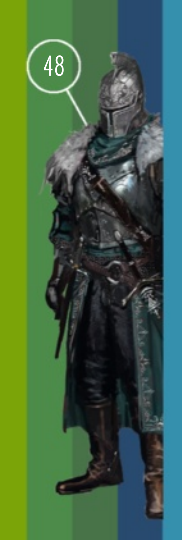
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WLEDGE

Next-gen consoles may be weeks away from release in the west, but Japan will have to wait: PS4 doesn't launch in Sony's home nation until February, while Xbox One has only a vague 2014 release date. As such, this year's Tokyo Game Show (1) wasn't solely defined by next-gen like E3 or Gamescom. As we find out on p14, this was a curious show, one split between smartphone games and next-gen tech such as Capcom's Panta Rhei and Hideo Kojima's Fox Engine. There's further evidence of a Japanese identity crisis on p20 as we go hands on with the new 2DS (2), which sacrifices 3DS's USP for a younger audience. On p22, we analyse Valve's long-rumoured move into the living room with the three-pronged assault of OS, hardware and, in Steam Controller (3), the boldest bit of input design since Wii Remote. On p24, we speak to the man whose gorgeous art not only got RPG *Hyper Light Drifter* (4) Kickstarted, but to over four times its goal within 24 hours. In Soundbytes (5) on p29, Bill Gates and Major Nelson sound off on two very different Microsoft problems, while JJ Abrams has a few unkind words to say about the awful Star Trek tie-in game. Rounding things out this month is My Favourite Game on p30, with Peter Berkman, the lead guitarist and songwriter from Anamanaguchi (6), discussing his favourite game soundtracks and the enduring appeal of the 8bit sonic palette.



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Next gen can wait

New consoles draw crowds at the Tokyo Game Show, but handheld hardware still dominates Japan's gaming scene

September's Tokyo Game Show offered the first chance for Japanese players to get their hands on next-gen hardware as well as a larger selection of mobile and social games than has ever filled the Makuhari Messe before. It was a show packed with evidence of handheld gaming usurping home consoles in the region, and of new niches opening up.

"The venue has got bigger this year, but at the same time the number of publishers not attending has also increased," said **Toshihiro Nagoshi** of Sega's Yakuza Studio. Konami and Level-5 were absent from the main floor, as were many western publishers; Tecmo Koei's booth bafflingly showed nothing but a gallery celebrating its ancient wargame *Nobunaga's Ambition*. And Capcom's release of *Monster Hunter 4* just days before TGS meant there was no obvious must-play game of the show.

"However, the attendance is very good, and it feels like a carnival, so I think it's OK to have simple booths that don't require much outlay," Nagoshi said, noting what would turn out to be a record 270,197 attendees. "But I do believe that the future of consoles will be decided with this generation, so if we don't make the effort to whip up interest, we could lose out."

Japan will get the next generation of hardware later than North America and Europe – PlayStation 4 in February, Xbox One some time later – and Japanese players have mixed feelings about the delay. Many feel Sony is taking Japan for granted, not least because several countries around Asia will see PS4 this side of Christmas. Others told us they are in no rush to snap up new hardware, the sting of Wii U's performance still fresh in their minds. "I don't care about graphics anyway – if the new generation doesn't bring new ways to play, I'm not that interested," said one attendee, echoing the opinions of many we spoke to.

"I don't care about graphics – if the new generation doesn't bring new ways to play, I'm not that interested"

Nonetheless, Sony and Microsoft's booths were still mobbed by attendees hungry to see what the coming generation will offer. Lines for all PS4 games at Sony's stand were maxed out repeatedly, closed off at the 100-minute-wait mark. This benefited smaller indie titles such as *Octodad* and *Hohokum*, which got the overspill of the more popular *Knack* and *Deep Down*.

And Microsoft, which has always struggled in Japan, drew players willing to wait three hours for *Titanfall* and two hours for *Crimson Dragon*. "Japanese people don't usually care about FPS games, but the mecha in *Titanfall* will appeal to our culture," said one Xbox fan lining up to play. "Perhaps it will be the FPS that breaks the genre in Japan." The 32-player *Battlefield 4* matches at EA's booth also drew long lines, although both games were aided in large part by their status as the graphical showpieces for the next generation.

But perhaps the fate of the next-gen console is beside the point in a nation where home gaming has long been on the wane, replaced by the take-anywhere thrills of handheld devices. To illustrate the point, 3DS's lifetime sales here have recently exceeded 12.75 million units, surpassing even the Wii's 12.69 million sales. Homes in Japan are typically smaller than in the west, and many people live with their parents until they marry. It's a country where young people are used to being out of the home, communing at a karaoke booth or a bar, or perhaps enjoying me-time at a manga cafe or department store.

"That's one of the reasons that games like *Monster Hunter* are very popular, because people bring their own device and get together to play rather than doing a home party," said **Shuhei Yoshida**, president of SCE worldwide studios. "It [was] definitely one major factor when we decided where to launch [PS4], and when. Japan is a more portable-heavy business, and PS3 is popular. Famitsu's data showed 70 per cent of home-console games were sold on PS3 for the past year. Many quality games are being released on PS3 now, so they're not exactly asking for PS4."

And so, in a year when next-gen consoles arrive in the west, Japan's biggest gaming show was defined by portable news. Though Nintendo stays away from TGS, thirdparty 3DS games made up a significant proportion of the show floor, and Vita also left its mark. Of the playable titles on Sega's booth, the most popular were its Hatsune Miku-based rhythm games for 3DS and Vita, along with *Sonic: Lost World* and *Puyo Puyo Tetris* on 3DS. Sony's revamped Vita hardware was a draw, and *Monster Hunter*-style team-action games such as *Soul Sacrifice Delta* and *God Eater 2* attracted long lines, with the latter the only title at the show to have a dedicated booth in the merchandise area.

PS Vita TV, meanwhile, was presented as a sort of bridge device for Vita owners

CONNECT FOUR
The *Monster Hunter* effect continues to influence publishers across Japan, and top fourplayer co-op titles hoping for a slice of the pie this year included *Soul Sacrifice Delta* and *God Eater 2* for Vita, and *Geist Crusher* for 3DS. And it wasn't hard to see why: the lobby, the food court, the kids' area, the hallways and many of the queues at TGS were populated by friends felling foes over ad-hoc 3DS or Vita networks. The hunt for the next monster hit continues, with even established brands such as *Phantasy Star* joining in the clamour.





Toshihiro Nagoshi (top) of Sega's Yakuza Studio, and president of SCE worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida

Viola Kam

to continue their game at home on the big screen or to consume e-manga and video content. It's a questionable move, in that Japan is trending away from the TV set, but no doubt Sony hopes it will give the Vita brand stronger resonance as it attempts to catch up with 3DS.

Mobile gaming is also a huge deal in Japan, where microtransactions can make a company's fortunes. No one knows this better than **Kazuki Morishita**, president of GungHo, whose mobile F2P game *Puzzle & Dragons* has close to 20 million users and reportedly brings in over $2 million per month. And, fittingly, a 3DS port was on show, which is due for a December release.

In a keynote speech, Morishita put the game's success partly down to its appeal to female players. "Women like the game's kawaii [cute] factor," he said, before adding self-deprecatingly, "not that a guy like me knows what women like." And, indeed, you are more likely to see women playing games in Japan than in the west, usually on 3DS or smartphone.

Smartphone games were everywhere at TGS. Capcom had *Monster Hunter Smart* and *OtoRanger* on display, and its big announcement at the show was smartphone RPG *Blade Fantasia*. Social gaming company Gree had a large booth with versions of *Final Fantasy* and *The Idolm@ster*, the latter alongside a tie-up with J-pop idol group AKB48. Smartphone games and paraphernalia dominated the indie area, the new otome (female-oriented romance sim) area, and the merchandise zone.

And so Japanese developers are split, perhaps more now than ever before. Do they focus on super-powerful, world-beating new game engines such as Kojima's Fox Engine, Capcom's Panta Rhei and Square Enix's Luminous Studio to give them the edge where in the previous generation they lagged behind? Or do they put their focus into smaller social games that are potentially more lucrative in the short term?

"Japanese developers are still unsure of how best to utilise their R&D and their resources," Nagoshi said. "Mobile and social, consumer console, consumer handheld; what's the best way to distribute resources and make a business model? They're unsure, and so am I."

"Up until now, there was an obvious step up in performance from PS1 to PS2 to PS3," noted Comcept CEO and *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* lead **Keiji Inafune**. "But PS4 takes a step both up and down, because it is a platform for triple-A games and low-budget indie [games]. Just as social and tablet gaming are becoming the future of the industry, consoles are also widening their appeal. Up until now, we'd always thought in terms of raw power, but not any more. That's a good thing for creators, but we'll have to wait and see how the public reacts."

Perhaps part of the problem is the adherence to the same old control schemes, with the new versions of Kinect and PlayStation Eye yet to make themselves felt as real draws after the tepid reaction to their first iterations. But help on this front may come from outside of Sony or Microsoft.

The waits for PS4 games stretched to 100 minutes, and players were turned away. But Japan is a territory in thrall to handheld games, as the makeup of the Makuhari Messe clearly demonstrated



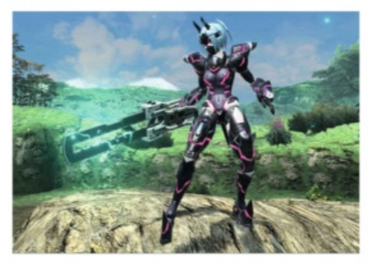
Japan may be receiving next-gen consoles late, but it gets PS Vita TV in November, months before other regions



PS Vita TV plays Vita games on your TV and hooks into streaming services. The Goron tablet cushion (below) is built for prolonged gaming sessions







An indeterminate 2014 Xbox One (above) release is telling of 360's poor Japanese sales. *Phantasy Star Online 2* (left) gameplay was shown off by Sega

"The only new feature out there that could enhance a horror game is a head-mounted display," said **Shinji Mikami**, who is currently developing *The Evil Within* for simultaneous release on current- and next-gen consoles. "I love the Oculus Rift – that's a thrill. For me, that's the real next-gen machine."

Mikami welcomes the idea of new home consoles, though, stating that despite the rise of handheld gaming in Japan, gamers will always hanker for big-screen, big-budget rollercoaster rides. But he also feels that just one next-gen machine would have been enough this time around. "There's no real difference between them. Why do I have to make two versions of my game? Either one will do. The user doesn't care about spec; they want the design to be cool. If Apple released a game console, it would make a lot of gamers happy."

And don't mention Nintendo's Wii U – certainly no one here does. We spotted just two Wii U games on show at TGS, and one of those, *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure*, has been out for months in Japan. The console still hasn't found a place in local players' hearts, with a software lineup that holds little appeal for adults and hardware that is not portable enough to appeal to children. When Nagoshi mentioned that the future of consoles will be decided this generation, it was no doubt said in the knowledge of widespread consumer indifference to Nintendo's ailing product.

So what are the games Japan wants to make and play? The territory is becoming ever more insular, with sales of western music, movies and games in steady decline as the younger generation embraces home-grown pop culture. Again, Japanese developers face a dilemma: to target Japan or to aim to appeal to the western audience? It's tricky to do both effectively.

"The only people in the west who play Japanese games are hardcore gamers, usually of a certain age," said Inafune. "If you told a 20-year-old kid [in the west] that Japan makes good games, he'd laugh at you. And from a Japanese perspective, western games aren't exactly bad, they're just not what Japan wants.

"Japan is a very strange country. For example, everyone [here] loves Apple but they have no interest in Xbox or in Samsung. It's like someone decides that Apple is cool and everyone else follows along, whether they think so or not. But I think it would be easier to convince Japan to play western games than the other way around. All we can do is to consider the rest of the world when we make our games."

Having said that, TGS 2013 hosted several key Japanese games that are making a stir the world over. *Metal Gear Solid V*, *The Evil Within*, *Dark Souls II*, *Crimson Dragon*, *D4*: all of these have confirmed western releases, and others such as *Deep Down* and *Yakuza Isshin* feature high up on many western players' localisation wishlists.

Nagoshi speculated that hosting the 2020 Olympic Games will draw the world's attention to Japan, offering an opportunity to win new fans with the sort of content only this territory can create. And **Hidetaka 'Swery65' Suehiro**, the maverick mind behind Access Games' *Deadly Premonition* and *D4*, said he feels that the renewed focus on independent games will bode well for Japan's future on the videogame world stage.

"Both the Xbox One and PS4 are rounding up indie titles, and I think that if they do a good job of that then Japan is in with a chance," he said. "I hope the world will be able to see the passion we have for our games, and that it will encourage Japanese developers to make more games that can appeal to the world and be picked up by international publishers – just like *D4* was." ■

OTAKU TAKE OVER

TGS has always been a beacon for otaku subculture, but this time the fandom really took control. Virtual pop idol Hatsune Miku was *everywhere*. She appeared in the form of Sega's rhythm game series, Sony's limited-edition Xperia handset, free PS Plus exclusive *Miku Miku Hockey* on Vita, cosplayers' tributes, and even the Domino's Pizza stand.

Otaku may be perceived as cultural losers, but since they tend to be single and without financial responsibilities, they plough a lot of cash into their hobbies. As such, they remain one of the most powerful consumer groups in Japan.

Performances by idol group NMB48 and singers from the *Idolm@ster* games delivered ludicrous lines, while plenty of otaku-friendly tat – cushioned iPad-holding recliners, a Gundam Vita model, refreshing eye masks – was found throughout the venue. And there were even otaku-targeted games, such as *Akiba'sTrip 2*, in which you expose vampires to the Akihabara sun by stripping off their maid costumes.

JAPAN GAME WATCH

A grab bag of titles that captured attendee interest at TGS 2013



PROJECT DIVA/PROJECT MIRAI

Hatsune Miku Project Diva F has only just come out in Europe, but its Vita and PS3 sequel was on show at TGS along with cutesy 3DS counterpart *Hatsune Miku Project Mirai 2*, both due for release in 2014. These are rhythm games par excellence. *Project Diva F* far outsold *Project Mirai* the first time, so *Project Mirai 2* is getting some of *Project Diva F*'s social functions. And both will include new songs cherry-picked from the community that uses Miku's Vocaloid voice.



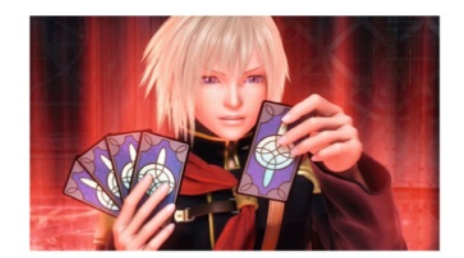
SOUL SACRIFICE DELTA

Keiji Inafune's first attempt to appeal to *Monster Hunter* fans may not have set sales records, but it did provide a boost to Vita sales in Japan. *Soul Sacrifice Delta* is not a sequel but an enhanced version, giving players more choice, new foes, improved enemy AI and scenarios based on Brothers Grimm fairytales. One key addition is that you can not only save or sacrifice vanquished foes this time around, but instead leave their fate up to the heavens as a third option.



THE EVIL WITHIN

Shinji Mikami's return to survival horror was hard to miss, even though it wasn't playable. Every major billboard on the way to TGS featured ads for *Psycho Break*, as it's known in Japan, while a vast graphic on the lobby floor depicted a gigantic spider-lady crawling out of the ground. A trailer interspersed gameplay video – lots more running and hiding than attacking and killing – with visuals of a grand building overlaid with flat-shaded protruding blocks.



FINAL FANTASY SERIES

Final Fantasy fans were in luck this year: Square Enix showed *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, *FFX/X-2 HD*, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call* and the recently released *FFXIV*, along with a trailer for *FFXV*. Perhaps most surprising of all was gameplay footage from *Final Fantasy Agito*, Square's new F2P mobile game, with visuals on par with PSP (if a little choppy) and even multiplayer. Details of its monetisation are still sketchy, but a localised release is promised.



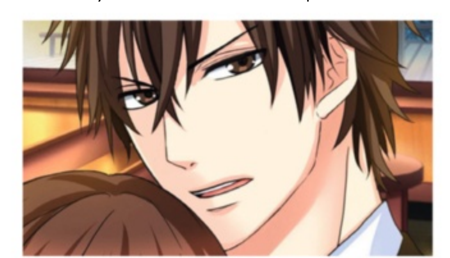
GEIST CRUSHER

Children needn't feel left out of the *Monster Hunter* action. Capcom's new IP draws on tropes from Power Rangers-style tokusatsu (special-effects) hero shows and drops them into a 3DS co-op brawler with visuals that match the anime, manga and toy collection. Yes, Capcom's taking the Level-5 route of market saturation, but this is developed by Treasure, and the gameplay – switch forms between human and monster while hacking opponents to bits – is as zippy as it is basic.



PUZZLE & DRAGONS Z

This 3DS port has you lining up gems on the bottom screen in *Bejeweled* fashion while your RPG-style party does battle with monsters up top. The quicker you work on those jewels and the better your combos, the more damage you'll do. Pricing isn't yet known, so it's not clear if this port will rely on microtransactions like the mobile version. But GungHo's eye is clearly on the casual market: TGS demos were given out not as download codes but on idiot-proof 3DS carts.



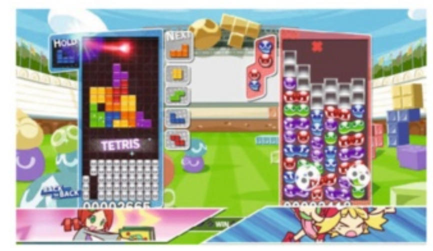
10 DAYS WITH MY DEVIL

The otome game area offered various female-friendly romance sims, but developer Voltage drew the biggest crowd, allowing women to pose for photos with a pair of men based on its games' characters. *10 Days With My Devil* is among the titles available in English, free to download for iOS and Android. Choose a dishy demon with whom you'd like to spend your last ten days alive, then read through pages of sensual visual novel prose as he whisks you off to heavenly hell.



MIKU MIKU HOCKEY

PlayStation Plus members in Japan get this free Vita game as a means to lure gamers to both Sony's handheld and the service itself, which is less popular in Japan than in the west. The game is table hockey, but played against Hatsune Miku via Sony's SmartAR tech. Using a marker card distributed at TGS or printable from Sony's site, Miku appears in your living room at a neon-electric hockey table. Control is handled by physically moving your Vita around.



PUYO PUYO TETRIS

As the name suggests, this is *Puyo Puyo* mashed up with *Tetris*. Rack up combos to send trash blocks to your opponent's screen; tetrominoes land on the *Puyo Puyo* side and can only be cleared by lining up like-colour Puyos underneath them, while lines of Puyos appear at the bottom of the *Tetris* screen with a one-block gap to clear them. It works better than it sounds, and should bring a frantic touch to the puzzle game when it lands on 3DS, Vita, PS3 and Wii U in 2014.



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Shifting dimensions

The kid-friendly 2DS might be a step back, but it says a lot about what Nintendo wants for Christmas

Be honest: if you own a 3DS, have you moved its 3D slider to its lowest position and removed its supposed USP as a matter of course? That's what we thought. As such, the invective that greeted Nintendo's announcement of a 3DS revision that removes stereoscopic 3D at a hardware level always felt misguided. In any case, 2DS isn't aimed at the snarky grown-ups for whom rounding on Nintendo's every strategic blunder has become a reflex. The company may have been targeting families for most of its time in the videogame business – and the marketing department's usual lifestyle photography makes out that this is also a system for all ages – but 2DS is for kids.

Kids that play *Pokémon* in particular. 3DS was undermined right out of the gate, first by tabloid scare stories with illustrations of grown-ups going boss-eyed on public transport, then by Nintendo's own admission that its new handheld's signature feature wasn't suitable for the under-sevens. That demographic may not matter greatly early on in a Nintendo system's life – early adopters tend to be a little greyer about the temples – but with 3DS's chance of a good Christmas depending heavily on *Pokémon X/Y*, something had to be done.

The result is 2DS, a 3DS without 3D and the first Nintendo handheld in a dozen years to eschew a clamshell design. There's sound logic behind the latter decision, judging by how many of the **Edge** brood have seen a handheld's hinge as something to be snapped or smeared with an unidentifiable sticky substance, but there are subtler forces at work. This flat design is clearly meant to look and feel familiar to a new generation of players whose formative gaming experiences have involved jabbing at an iPad's touchscreen.

It also means Nintendo can cut production costs. Replacing 3DS's two discrete screens with a single larger one (separated into two not by a hinge but a wedge of plastic) will help reduce manufacturing overheads. And while the chunky plastic shell may seem like more cost-cutting, it makes for a typically robust piece of Nintendo hardware that fits as snugly in adult as juvenile hands, one that should survive being flung unprotected into a schoolbag thanks to the thick layer of plastic over the screen. It's still clearly designed for kids – the L and R buttons that curve around 2DS's top corners have much more travel at their lowest point on the outer edges of the system, accommodating the slight of index finger – but the weight and feel continue Nintendo's family-friendly design legacy.

> Even if we rarely used it, it's impossible to see the loss of 3D as anything but a retrograde step

There are other little changes. The wireless switch on the launch model's left side has been removed, and the feature is now toggled by tapping a wrench icon in the system's Home menu (which also provides access to brightness settings). With no lid to snap shut, you put 2DS into Sleep mode by flicking a switch on its lower edge. There are odd little hangovers from the system's 3D parent – it still has two cameras on the rear, enabling you to take and share 3D photos – but there are changes for the better, too. Start and Select now have circular buttons like the DS Lite and DSi, instead of the unpleasant flat surface found on the launch 3DS, which was only slightly improved on the 3DS XL.



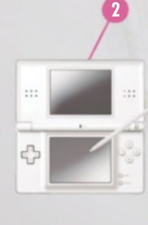
2DS feels oddly top-heavy, even in grown-up hands, though you'll barely notice it while playing stylus-intensive games. The Circle Pad and face buttons have been placed either side of the top screen to compensate

We'll admit we too have played more 3DS games with the slider at its lowest point than at its maximum, but even if we rarely used it, it's impossible to see the loss of 3D as anything but a retrograde step. Now the only discernible difference between DS and 3DS software is resolution. Most disappointing of all is the absence of the biggest potential benefit of dropping the system's one-time USP: improved battery life. 2DS lasts three-and-a-half to five hours, a minor improvement on existing models, rising to five to nine hours while playing a DS game. Yet at £110 – around two-thirds of the suggested RRP of a 3DS XL – it's competitively priced, and while it might not be able to match a tablet for industrial design or versatility, you can't play *Pokémon* on an iPad. Nintendo will hope that proves incentive enough to get 2DS into the hands of a new generation on Christmas morning. ■

ALL IN THE FAMILY

In terms of hardware revisions, a lot has changed between DS and 2DS. The bulky launch model DS ❶ was greatly improved on by the DS Lite ❷, which was 40 per cent smaller. The DSi ❸ was thinner but had slightly larger screens, plus an SD card slot and front- and rear-facing cameras. Only with the DS XL ❹ did Nintendo reverse the trend towards compact hardware, making a device aimed squarely at older players. By contrast, the 3DS family just keeps getting bigger. Nintendo's claim that the launch 3DS ❺ was as small as the system would get was met with scepticism, but the screens on the 3DS XL ❻ are 90 per cent bigger than the launch model's. Meanwhile, the slate-style 2DS ❼ is, at 127mm high, the tallest Nintendo handheld since the Game Boy Pocket.

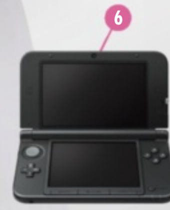














Control Valve

Valve reveals the controller designed to help PC gaming take over the biggest screen in the house

DUELLING THUMBS
Valve says that the dual trackpads' 1 sensitivity approaches that of a mouse, and the entire surface is clickable; the controls Valve outlines for *Portal 2* use the left movement pad as the jump button. The most problematic element of the pad is the button layout 2, which busts through all convention by arranging the standard face buttons around the touchpad. It raises the question of how games designed for traditional controllers will feel on it. The touchscreen 3 faces the issue of being potentially different in every game to account for different functions; having it also displayed on the main screen seems an inelegantly obtrusive solution to having to glance down at the pad. Dual shoulder buttons 4 on each side of the controller are complemented by paddles where your fingers rest, which *Cortex Command* developer Dan Tabár has described as "a stroke of genius". Dual linear resonant actuators 5 are capable of delivering a far wider breadth of sensory effects than are presently common. They can even play sounds, and provide rumble.





Valve might control gaming on the desktop, but now its gaze is fixed on another room in the house. The three announcements the company made at the end of September – SteamOS, Steam Machines and Steam Controller – reveal its plans to pry open the traditional console's grip on the living room. The lines between the two are clearly drawn: the closed console against an open-source operating system built on Linux and optimised for gaming; hardware made from standard PC components that owners will be able to chop, change and upgrade at their leisure; and a controller unlike its console peers.

"I can certainly see that for many people [the controller] will be the silver bullet that tips them into sticking a PC under their TV," says **Rob Bartholomew**, brand director of the *Total War* series at The Creative Assembly, who has used a Steam Controller. It's a key part of the 'Steam Box' concept: the bridge between the mouse-and-keyboard game and sofa-bound players, and it's the first developmental leap forward for the controller since Wii's Remote.

Steam Controller certainly has a lot of responsibility resting on its familiar-looking shoulder buttons. It takes the basic form set by Sony's first DualShock in 1997 of twin grips and thumb-based directional controls, but as well as being recognisable, it needs to offer flexibility and fidelity of control that at least matches a standard 104-key keyboard and 800dpi mouse, while feeling comfortable in the hands. Or, framed in other terms, it needs to allow a *Dota 2* player to be competitive against desktop opponents. As Valve's **Greg Coomer** told us last year, "That's one of the cases we're looking at: how can you deliver an even better play experience than people have sitting at a desk? We want to accomplish it with a traditional gamepad."

> "For many people [the controller] will be the silver bullet that tips them into sticking a PC under their TV"

Valve's solution is dual trackpads in the place of thumbsticks, and a configurable touchscreen. The trackpads are evidently sensitive to gaming's haptic demands. Concentric ridges in the pad help inform you where your thumb is in relation to the centre, while a subtle range of buzzes from dual linear resonant actuators provide a sense of interaction, force and the bounds of control. "Personally, I initially thought it all sounded a bit [like a] novelty and I couldn't see how it would compare to thumbsticks if you were playing an FPS, for example," Bartholomew says. "Having used it, though [for *Counter-Strike Global Offensive* and *Total War: Rome II*], it really is surprising how much the haptic feedback motors make a profound difference. No, it's not exactly the same, but it very much won me over."

Fredrik Wester, CEO of Paradox Interactive, agrees, having played a thirdperson action game with it: "Once you start playing, it's not that different from console gamepad joysticks; it felt natural after five minutes, so I didn't think that much about it, to be honest."

If the trackpads provide precision, the touchscreen delivers flexibility. Specific actions can be mapped to and displayed on it, and like DualShock 4, the entire surface is a button, allowing for the likes of radial menus in which you touch, hold and press to confirm your selection. Less elegantly, Steam can overlay the screen on the main display so you don't have to glance down to see what you're hitting.

The current prototypes that developers are trying out have four buttons in place of the touchscreen. But even the visualised hardware seems certain to change as Valve reacts to beta feedback

The screen's programmable nature raises the question of how much optimisation games will require from both players and developers. The controller will support all games out of the box, and players will be able to bind the commands they want to it. However, as Wester says, while first- and thirdperson games won't need much attention, "for the grand strategy series we need to do some thinking."

"*Rome II* was controllable, if not exactly playable, straight away," says Bartholomew. "But jumping in and out of the settings to tweak the config rapidly resulted in something more playable, and we've no doubt that something very usable indeed would be possible within an hour."

Anyone can drag a PC into their living room; how you control it is the challenge. The game maker which became a platform holder is now an industrial designer, another development in this extraordinary company's history. Steam Controller's success will be proven by feedback from the 300 beta testers who will get their hands on it later this year. If they're positive, Valve could be set to expand PC gaming another order of magnitude further. ■

HARD TO PORT
One of the big challenges for Valve's vision is the size of the SteamOS library. At the time of writing, Steam lists just 468 Linux games, compared to 8,012 Windows games. Will developers commit the resources to porting their games in order to make SteamOS as appealing a marketplace? It's hard to imagine Linux gaming will take anything less than years to approach the same magnitude, but with Microsoft reconfiguring Windows as a tablet-based OS, perhaps it's a jump that PC gaming will have to take to remain as open and vibrant as it is today.





LIGHT SOURCED

Pixel-art RPG Hyper Light Drifter explodes on Kickstarter

Alex Preston underestimated things a little. His game, *Hyper Light Drifter*, was put on Kickstarter with a $27,000 goal; within 24 hours it had made four times that number, and after two weeks, ten times the modest sum he needed to finish the game. The slew of stretch goals reached will add a cooperative campaign, extra bosses, an extended intro cinematic and – having passed the $220,000 mark – PS4 and Vita ports of the art-driven action-RPG.

"It seems like the world I've crafted thus far has resonated with people in a bigger way than I had anticipated," says the artist. "I think besides the visual hooks and hinted world, people enjoy the concepts behind it; there's a deep love for action-RPGs and for grand adventures in general."

But the real sell is that visual hook: pixel art so beautiful that you yearn to see it brought to life. "I've been designing games for myself and friends since I was a child," Preston says. "I have no public exposure or studio track record. I'm fresh to this side of it all, which is kind of a beautiful thing for me."

Samurai Gunn's Beau Blyth is handling programming duties, while Disasterpeace (*Fez*) will compose the soundtrack. Preston is sticking to what he knows: art and game design. "It's a conjunction of fantasies, dreams, designs and childhood influences that have swirled around and meshed together, formed into something dark and moving with strikes of light. I'm influenced by *Secret Of Mana*, *Zelda*, *Final Fantasy VI*, *Journey*, *Fez*, *Spelunky* and *Super Smash Bros*; by Akira, [Neon Genesis] Evangelion and anything from Miyazaki; classic Disney with its excellent use of colour and composition; and Pixar for its profound ability to tell a moving story without saying a word. *Hyper Light Drifter* has only been in development at a code level for six months, but conceptually? For most of my life." ■


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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls


AP/Press Association Images

"Emotionally, it hurt, 'cos we were working our asses off making the movie and then this game came out and it got universally panned. That didn't help the movie, and arguably hurt it."

JJ Abrams didn't like Digital Extremes' *Star Trek* game either, then

"It disrespects the teams that have put thousands of hours into the development of the product… I don't care for it myself."

Microsoft's **Larry Hryb** despairs of the 'Xbone' label – and thus ensures that it'll stick

AP/Press Association Images

"[Ctrl+Alt+Delete] was a mistake. **We could have had a single button,** but the guy who did the IBM keyboard design didn't wanna give us our button."

Bill Gates regrets the unnecessary complexity of every PC gamer's eject command

"These games can have a powerful effect, and I expect in some cases a corrosive effect on someone's behaviour. They occupy a world of their own and that can have a very detrimental effect."

Deputy Prime Minister **Nick Clegg** slams *GTA*, one of Britain's few billion-dollar exports

AP/Press Association Images

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game *Puyo Puyo Quest Arcade*
Manufacturer Sega

Puyo Puyo Quest Arcade is a coin-op that operates perfectly well without even a single coin; a free-to-play game propped up by models tested in the mobile space.

Sega has experimented with multi-game cabinets, mouse controllers and online distribution methods, but *Puyo Puyo Quest Arcade* is by far its boldest arcade experiment. Still, even in its bravery Sega is playing things safe. *Puyo Puyo Quest* has been available for iOS since April and is a tried-and-tested copy of Japan's most popular mobile game, *Puzzle & Dragons*, doing little more than replacing *Bejeweled*'s match-three gameplay with *Puyo Puyo*'s match-four on the puzzle side of affairs, and swapping the dragons for *Puyo Puyo* characters on the aesthetic side. *Quest Arcade* alters the camera angle and the F2P model, swapping the mobile game's consumables for time units; in arcades, the first 15 minutes are free and either skilful play or an injection of hard cash will keep the play timer ticking.

Sega, like Namco, is trying a variety of payment models and distribution methods in the limbo between console generations. Japan has lost its love for the traditional home console and players have become accustomed to playing for pennies. The door is open for new ideas, but Sega's F2P arcade experiment will have to be a spectacular success to justify *Puyo Puyo Quest Arcade*'s wardrobe-sized chunk of arcade real estate, especially when a very similar game takes up just a few inches in the palm of your hand.

My favourite game
Peter Berkman

Anamanaguchi's founder and lead guitarist talks chiptune, fantasy worlds and Dark Souls

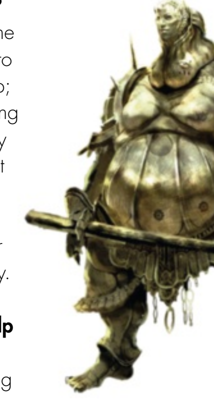
Anamanaguchi originally intended to blend punk rock with the contrastingly cheerful noise wrung from NES and Game Boy sound chips, but the band has since evolved to encompass pop, electronica and even club anthems. While guitarist and founder **Peter Berkman** took on primary songwriting duties, the band has adopted a more collaborative approach for its latest album, Endless Fantasy. Anamanaguchi also provided the soundtrack for *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World: The Game*. Here, Berkman discusses the differing challenges of composing albums and soundtracks, the appeal of chiptune and disassembling consoles.

What was the inspiration behind the band's sound?
It's stuff that we grew up with, stuff that was kind of off limits. It was really fun to take apart our toys… at the same time trying to blend this super-raw digital sound – abrasive and weird – with guitar.

How would you describe your sound?
We're just trying to make music that's the shit we like, and the shit we like tends to be where digital and analogue overlap; humanising these kinds of sounds, putting emotion into electronic stuff. We're very influenced by Japanese culture. We just try to make it sound real, whether that's making a track with a snowboard fantasy sound that sounds like Aqua, or a 200bpm punk song that's super-crazy.

Does the familiarity of 8bit sounds help make your songs appealing?
Yeah, I mean there's definitely something weird to that. More and more artists use 8bit sounds in hip-hop and everywhere. If you put on the radio and listen to modern pop music, there's a big chance that some 8bit or 8bit-inspired songs will be coming up pretty soon. For us, the way we use it, we're just trying to make pop music in the traditional sense. We're not trying to offend anybody, we're just trying to have some fun.

WHY MUSIC'S NO GAME
Anamanaguchi formed in New York City in 2004 and quickly garnered a live following through energetic live shows. Its debut album, Dawn Metropolis, was released in 2009 on dream.hax before the band went on to contribute songs to *Bit.Trip Runner* and soundtrack *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World: The Game*. In May this year, Anamanaguchi launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a second album, Endless Fantasy. The campaign reached its funding goal of $50,000 in just 11 hours and went on to gross $277,399, making it the second most successful music project on the site at the time. Endless Fantasy was released in the same month.



Do you ever have anyone at your gigs who's too young to spot the references?
Absolutely. I was born in 1988, three years after the NES came out in the US. I played one growing up a little bit, but, and for these kids too, it's not really a nostalgic idea. It's more the excitement of… I don't know, maybe fantasy worlds. That's the appeal, that's what I think the game element brings to it, this idea of fantasy and adventure. Each track on the new record has its own kind of fantasy world.

"What I think the game element brings to our music is this idea of fantasy and adventure"

Do you ever wish you could shake the videogame music comparisons, though?
I think plenty of people have already made tons of chip music that has nothing to do with games. We're a bit in the middle: some of our stuff is undeniably gamey, but there are artists, such as Format, who make beautiful music with low technology. You're never going to cut away your roots, you're going to grow from them. Then you have a giant fucking tree that has cool-ass branches that owe everything to the roots you can't see.

How did composing a game soundtrack differ from making an album?
It was quite different. First of all, it was the first time we ever really worked collaboratively. Before that it was pretty much my project, but after that it became like an actual band. We had 45 songs to write in a short amount of time! At the same time, musically, it was very different because it had us writing specifically videogamey songs. If we're putting together an album, we're not concerned about writing boss music, y'know? [Laughs.] Sometimes we joke around and play the instrumental tracks without the NES in them and it sounds so fucking bad. It's like, who is this band?

Are there any game soundtracks that have really stuck with you?
Definitely. A little Flash game called *Tower Of Heaven* – it's brilliant. The *Final Fantasy VII* soundtrack I've listened to a lot; I've just completed that game recently for the first time. I beat it the day before leaving for tour – I beat Sephiroth on my first try! Obviously the *Katamari* soundtrack is incredible – the variety, yet interconnectedness, is amazing.

And which game is your favourite?
I have three: *Deus Ex*, *Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask* and *Dark Souls*. Fuck, I really can't choose. They're my favourites for different reasons. I think *Zelda* has the best story, mood and aesthetic, and I think *Deus Ex* has the best immersion. But If I had to pick one: *Dark Souls*. ■



Anamanaguchi was initially the brainchild of Peter Berkman (second from left), though it's since become more collaborative. The band draws on many influences, among them games and Japanese culture

Signe Pierce



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Steam Playtime
www.bit.ly/12hEcCk

With Valve finally detailing its move into the living room (see p22), now seems like an appropriate time to warn PC gaming's potential new market about the dangers of impulse buying. PC games are cheap; so cheap that you'll quickly amass a backlog of such unassailable size that it will dwarf your console pile of shame within months. A word of advice, then: when you find your cursor hovering over the Buy button on the latest Steam daily deal or Humble Bundle offering, head over to Steam Playtime first. Enter your Steam ID and your backlog will be put into stark numerical context, measuring how long it'd take to complete all those games first in hours then, terrifyingly, days. It also says how much the lot is worth at current prices. Now, do you *really* need that £1.74 copy of *Surgeon Simulator 2013*?



VIDEO

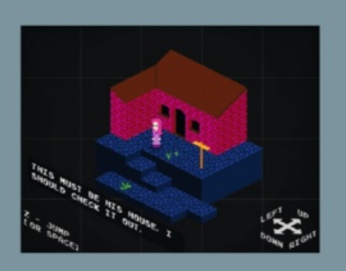
35 Ways To Die In Grand Theft Auto V
www.bit.ly/15M8xXU

GTAV may not put ragdolls to the same comic use as *GTAIV*, and the game can fade to black a little too soon, cutting short many a tumble down the side of Mount Chiliad, but this compilation video shows that there's something to be said for the blunt finality of death in *GTAV*. Whether it's jumping headfirst into a wall, skydiving into a cable car, or being hit by a car that's been hit by a plane the result is the same: the music cuts out, the vivid colours of San Andreas state fade away, and everything goes dark. We regret nothing.

WEB GAME

Naya's Quest
www.bit.ly/16KQrZF

Terry Cavanagh made a game out of everything players ever hated about 2D platform games in *VVVVVV* and somehow found the fun in brutal instadeath platforming, so of course he would make a game out of everything we hated about the 8bit isometric worlds of *Head Over Heels* and *Knight Lore*. *Naya's Quest* has a total disregard for logical pathing and for what your eyes tell you; its isometric view is used to obfuscate and distort your perception of the space onscreen. Tiles that appear to be at Naya's feet may in fact be resting on an entirely separate plane and only a limited scanner lets you see the world as it really is, one plane at a time. It's a tricky puzzler and a punishing challenge, but an immaculate piece of design from one of the smartest developers still giving ideas away for free.



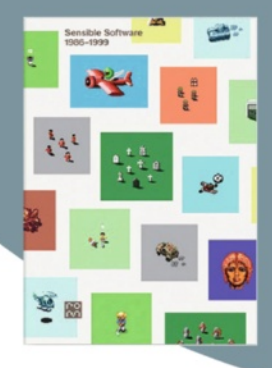
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things catching our attention during the production of **E**260

BOOK

Sensible Software 1986-1999 by Gary Penn

In the early 90s, Sensible Software's Chris Yates and Jon Hare were the definitive bedroom coders come good, *Sensible Soccer* and *Cannon Fodder* establishing them as Britsoft legends. It would not last. A head-spinning expansion diluted their DNA and their reluctance to embrace "fucking 3D" rendered them obsolete at the onset of the 32bit age. This sepia-tinged Kickstarted behemoth – 'part biography, part art book' – features extended interviews with one half of the Sensible team, Jon Hare, alongside shrewd asides from several contemporaries, all expertly framed by Gary Penn. Pixel-porn art showcases the exquisite attention to detail that characterised this quintessentially British software house and fills half the book, which is planned to be the first of many new volumes from game-centric publisher Read-Only Memory.



continue

Wii Sports Club
RemotePlus-enabled HD remakes torn from the best pack-in ever? Yes!

Offline SimCity
And mod support, too. Better late than never we suppose

The Last Guardian
Still in development and "well staffed". Hope springs eternal

Steam Controller
We're looking forward to playing *StarCraft II* from the sofa

quit

Wii Sports Club
£9 per sport? For a seven-year-old pack-in? Preorder cancelled

Clang
Neal Stephenson's venture into videogames ends with a clunk

NUads
Microsoft: kill this ad man's wet dream and we'll accept DRM

Steam Controller
A third voice in the tired mouse-and-keyboard vs gamepad debate



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TWEETS

Game development is one of the few industries where it's totally fine for a grown man to carry in a Transformers lunch box.
Jameson Durall @JamesonDurall
Design director, Volition

The only explanation I can give for reinstalling *Candy Crush Saga* is that I hate myself.
Jeff Green @Greenspeak
Director of editorial and social media, PopCap

Thanks to everyone who came to the Gearbox Community Day. Except for that dude asking people to sign his *Aliens* cover with the words "I'm sorry."
Anthony Burch @reverendanthony
Writer, Gearbox

Wind Waker HD makes me sad, because this is the path that *Zelda* could have explored if the Internet didn't take a shit on it in 2003.
Kris Piotrowski @krispiotrowski
Creative director, Capy



Microsoft



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DISPATCHES DECEMBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss the representation of women in the grimy urban playground that is Los Santos, the price tags attached to a new generation and what used games end up costing our industry. Elsewhere **Steven Poole** rejoices in the glorious artistic minimalism of iOS puzzler *Dots*, **Leigh Alexander** examines the kind of videogame fan who is so opposed to oversensitivity that they start to demonstrate that exact trait, and **Brian Howe** takes us back to Ancient Greece to witness the first of the interminable console wars.





Issue 260

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

A woman's touch

I'm really enjoying the fifth instalment of *Grand Theft Auto*, but there's something bothering me about the series. The continuing insistence on fielding a boys-only club has seen Rockstar fail to capitalise on a wealth of experience from women. This is not solely the fault of the studio; in seeking to satirise American culture and its crime stories, there is little there to inspire and influence a different attitude to gender. Consider most gangster films or television series: the women will be little more than wives, daughters, prostitutes or mistresses. Protagonists in possession of ovaries are not rare, they are nonexistent.

If any company is in a position to have something to say about this issue it is Rockstar. *Grand Theft Auto V*'s insane sales success has surely given the company the opportunity to take risks with the format.

So I'm calling Rockstar out. It wants to be the last word in organised crime fiction, but to do so it should acknowledge that there are gangsters whose stories have been ignored in both the cinemas and our living rooms. It should find female story writers and developers, people who have something else to say about gender and sexuality, and allow them to give us a new protagonist.
Alec Paton

The lack of a female lead is disappointing, and some of the roles women play in *GTAV* are abhorrent. But none of the main characters are heroes either, so would a female protagonist really equate to positive representation? Still, it'd be a start.

The gentler sex?

Leigh Alexander's views on *GTAV* are, for the most part, correct; the game is indeed misogynistic. The crux of her argument doesn't focus on obvious distractions such as lap dancing or prostitution, but rather the fact that here we have another *GTA* game, smashing sales records and lauded as the bastion of interactive entertainment, and yet once again none of the playable characters are female. As Leigh has discussed previously, a lack of female developers means that we have an industry-wide problem of sexism and misogyny in games. And with this in mind, I feel like her view on *GTAV* is criticising a symptom instead of a cause.

A well-written female protagonist does offer a breath of fresh air and is more meaningful than the inclusion of typically strong but suggestively dressed heroines, but a good character is a good character, regardless of their gender. *Mass Effect* had the right idea. The option to make Commander Shepard either male or female has absolutely no bearing on the plot, and through your own choices you can decide the character's sexuality. Although the story remains the same, the overall experience that the player receives can change greatly based on this variable. This, coupled with the ability to make decisions which actually affect the story, provides an opportunity to truly make a character your own, whether it reflects your gender and sexuality or not.

Rockstar could certainly be commended if it had included a playable female character, but I don't believe it is fair to criticise the studio for the fact it didn't. The franchise is known for its balance of political and pop culture satire along with the fact that it pays homage to action films and includes stereotypes and themes typical of the genre. The narrative is also much more tightly controlled than the one in *Mass Effect* and the characters' personalities are stronger and more defined as a result.

Would a playable female character in *GTA* be beautiful and strong willed in order to provide a suitable but stereotypical role model, or would she be fairly manifested as foul mouthed, ugly and amoral as the men? I don't think Rockstar is incapable of pulling this off. Despite not having all that much screen time and not being a playable character, *Red Dead Redemption*'s Abigail Marston is one of my favourite female characters in this generation. Vulgar and strong willed, this capable mother could also put her husband in his place.

I feel that the typical portrayal of male characters in videogames is a little bit sexist, too, but that's another topic entirely.
Paul Briggs

The symptoms of any disease allow for its diagnosis, and as such it's reasonable to point them out. Nonetheless, we agree that what we need is to fix this problem at the root. Our representation of females should be driven by talented, mindful writers and developers with the guts to put females front and centre in their games.

Count the cost

The world is very different to the one into which past consoles launched, and wallets are not as full. As such, beyond the initial rush of early adopters, I can't see many people buying PS4 and Xbox One. Certainly, the majority of my friends are all waiting for the price to come down. Just look at what happened to the 3DS when released; it only started selling after a price drop. People today look for greater value, and I think a £55 game, £60 controller, and £350 to £429 console may be pushing too far for the average person on the high street. Personally, I intend to stick with my 360 and £10 to £15 games, purchased three months after release, for a while longer.
Andy Cooper

If the value proposition doesn't yet appeal to you, don't buy into the next generation.

There will continue to be games for 360 and PS3 for months, perhaps years, to come. But PS4's pre-order figures alone would indicate that others feel they can spare the outlay costs associated with a new generation.

Feeling used

As a PS3 loyalist, I was mostly indifferent when I heard that the Xbox One wouldn't necessarily play used videogames. I don't buy used games and I probably won't own an Xbox One until a few years down the road, so the news neither irritated nor impressed me. Then E3 happens, Microsoft flips, Sony receives rapturous applause for the announcement that PS4 will play used games, and I find myself disappointed in Microsoft for backing down from a policy that even used game buyers must know in some deep recess of their consciousness is actually good for the industry, and disgusted with Sony for playing the politician and appealing to/appeasing whichever group will give them the win.

The culture and the community deserve better than this, even if a large portion of the community doesn't realise it. Am I naively idealistic? Is there any way of knowing with any certainty how much profit the used-game market diverts from studios and publishers? How many programmers have lost jobs because the used-game market siphoned profits that might otherwise have gone to their studio? Is an all-digital system the only solution, and if so how far off is that solution? How long until consumers are willing to accept that? Why do I even care?

I can only answer that last question with any amount of certainty; I care because videogame culture is awesome. Videogame conversations with strangers are cool, you know? It feels good to be watching Breaking Bad and able to follow a conversation between its characters about whether *Left 4 Dead* is more intense than *RE4*. It feels good to realise that a friendship has just deepened over shared remembrances of the exploits of Malak and Revan.

The people who create these products probably love videogames as much as we do, and furthermore, they are probably not much different than us and our videogame geek friends. To me, buying used games from retailers feels like letting the people who made those games down. I'm not a fan of anything that undermines the culture. The used game market does exactly that.
Ukuume Hardeman

> "To me, buying used games from retailers feels like letting the people who made those games down"

There are advantages to pre-owned games: they can help the cash-strapped subsidise new releases, for instance. But, as you say, they also undermine the industry. And digital solutions only become attractive if publishers are prepared to pass some of the cost savings onto consumers (eShop, we're looking at you). Regardless, we hope you stick to your morals when your Vita arrives.

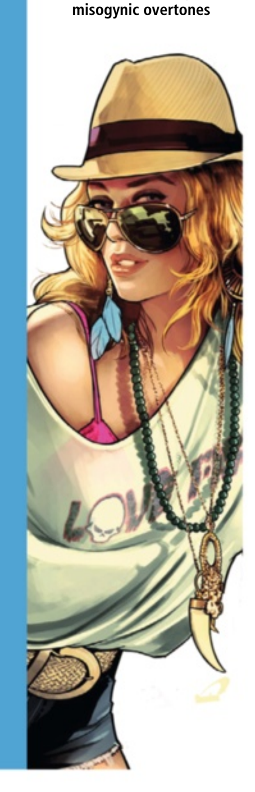
It pays to advertise

With so few Kinect games announced for Xbox One, it's a fair question to ask why Microsoft is bundling Kinect in every box, but Microsoft answered that at the Privacy Identity Innovation conference: so it can sell you out.

Now your Xbox will watch you watching advertisements and gauge just how little you care. Kinect reports back as to whether or not people were looking at the screen, and the worst part is the moustache-twirling glee with which Microsoft's rep talked about just how much money they would make from NUads. My favourite line was: "During the Super Bowl, you're watching TV, some great ads pop up and you say 'Xbox Share'." As if people are just waiting for the commercial break so they can say, "Dude, did you see that ad for Um Bongo? Man, that was sick."

What universe do these people inhabit? Why are AdBlock, DVRs, Netflix, and piracy so popular? Because ads are intrusive and annoying and everybody hates them. So, to counter this, we need more ads. And we need to really ramp up the intrusion. Can we get the TV to complain if you're not paying attention? Or perhaps shut down?
Michael Jenkins

We're not quite there yet, Michael. The glee was slimy, but Microsoft has changed tack before and could well do so again. ■



Rockstar only lets us play as a woman in *GTAV*'s online mode. But you question if simply having a female lead would solve the game's misogynic overtones

ONLINE OFFLINE

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The thought of yet another console war is putting Clint Hocking off

I'm always so fucking glad that we have a standard for DVD players, stereos and tellies. Can you imagine having to choose which Blu-ray player you bought because only some films were exclusive to it whilst others were multiplatform? The machines are just hardware; it's only the games that count.
Alan Mitchell

I'm not interested in war. I just want a console.
Nigel Powley

The more I think about it, and having played both at Eurogamer [Expo], the more I'm inclined to ditch consoles and become a full-time PC gamer
Jake Plummer

The mixed reception to GTA Online

GTAV is one of the best games ever. GTA Online, however, has just been a complete clusterfuck so far. I don't know anyone who can even start the first intro race, let alone play the game properly. The 'unexpected high demand' excuses don't cut it either. How long have they had to prepare for this?
Kev Grosvenor

I seem to be one of the few people actually capable of playing and I've been playing since launch.
Duncan Dwyer

I've made my character, but that's it. Probably not going to try again until at least the weekend. This was always going to happen.
Richard Cadman



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Minimalist, high-art *Dots* is smug, snide, smirking and has a viscous smarm that exudes from every pixel

Some games imply a world rather than showing one. When I play the popular mobile game *Dots*, I envision a smooth, futuristic world where the game is solemnly played all day by sprightly and tanned pensioners dressed in tailored white linen, stroking their *Dots*-running phablets while padding around barefoot in spacepod homes built entirely of brushed aluminium.

While we await this utopia, *Dots* stands as an impressive demonstration of how minimalism, if executed with a heretofore unimaginable smugness, can generate an existential weather of mental vacancy and terrifying futility. At first it looks as though what *Dots* has done, with relentless mastery, is void the videogame of any mimetic content whatsoever. It is one of the most abstract videogames yet made. The dots, in their tasteful reds, cyans and purples, are not supposed to be anything else. The dots of *Pac-Man*'s maze were obviously something: Pac-Man ate them, so they were food of some physical or at least symbolic kind.

Even in an apparently abstract puzzler such as *Tetris*, the geometric figures are commonly referred to as bricks and it's hard not to read what takes shape at the base of the screen as a wall. (*Tetris* is a game about tidying up, yes, but it's also a game about building a wall: you just need to build it perfectly, with no gaps, to be allowed to forget what you have already constructed.)

In *Dots*, the dots are not supposed to be anything except what they are: dots. But this itself is an aesthetic statement, and a snide two-pronged reference. First, *Dots* is announcing that it is not like those trashy puzzle games featuring skeuomorphic jewels or balloons. *Dots* is tasteful; those other games are for chavs. Second, *Dots* is adroitly recreating the smirking hipster minimalism of Damien Hirst's spot paintings, which the celebrity artist (or perhaps his minion-people) churns out by the hundreds.

So it would also be fitting to play the game in a Shoreditch café, with your mustard corduroy trousers carefully rolled up to show off your crépe-soled brogues, and your precisely combed, brilliantined hair forming a rigorous contrast with your bushy beard, a beard that reaches almost all the way down to the iPad on which you're playing *Dots*.

Dots is the game it's OK to be seen playing if you'd be embarrassed to be seen playing a game

Dots is the videogame it's OK to be seen playing if you would be embarrassed to be seen playing a videogame. Ian Bogost has previously said something similar about *Hundreds*, but *Hundreds*, with its numbers and gears, looks potentially dorky, if you care about being mistaken for a dork. *Dots*, by contrast, is pure high art (or at least haute art-industry). It gives precisely nothing away, while strenuously calling attention to itself, and you.

Dots is a brilliantly smarmy videogame. The smarminess of the way the dots pulse when you touch them; the smarmy way they bounce several times when dropping down a line; the smarminess of the sonic feedback (bloopy arpeggio fragments rather than anything so crass as music); the smarminess, even, of the thin typography, adroitly jumping on the design-fashion bandwagon before iOS7 was beamed to the masses. Playing *Dots* makes my hands feel greasy from the saturated smarminess it embodies. I'm surprised I can still see the screen through the viscous smarm exuded from every pixel of *Dots*.

In its singleminded ambition to be the smarmiest videogame ever made, *Dots* even betrays its own governing aesthetic of non-meaning with a subtitle – *Dots: A Game About Connecting*. This works on so many levels that one wants to go to sleep in despair, having first set fire to the ground floor of your house and making sure that the resulting inferno will leave nothing standing. Yes, *Dots* is a game about 'connecting' the dots (cue smarmy arpeggios and smarmy dot-bouncing).

What you get after connecting the dots is a score. And then you can 'connect' with other people by, for example, tweeting your score. This is instructive insofar as it is another example of how the techno-industrial complex cloaks its imperial ambition in the touchy-feely language of psychotherapeutic virtue. *Dots* wants to persuade you that, through *Dots*, you are 'connecting' with other people. In fact what you are doing, when you do that, is advertising *Dots*.

In children's activity books, connecting the dots comes with artistic reward: you see what the picture is supposed to be. It is beneath *Dots* to offer such pleasure in return for submitting to the ineffably, mind-numbingly tedious work of its play system. I suspect that the purpose of *Dots* is nothing but to numb the mind in a tasteful way.

Dots is, of course, wildly successful. And this makes me nervous. Because if you were told to design a ludoweapon – a brain-anaesthetising game that sucked literally millions of people into its antiseptic universe of cleanly minimal sensory tickling and repetitive nonsensical labour – what else would you come up with but *Dots*?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net





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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

People that feel the need to defend videogames at all costs display the exact same sensitivity they claim to abhor

There are several elements of predictable crowd behaviour when it comes to the highly anticipated launches of huge-budget videogames. First, the game is liable to receive generally high reviews, with minor variations among outlets. Second, the outliers on that narrow range will be subject to scrutiny – the perfect score must have been 'bought by PR', while the 'half-point lower than the median' score is a travesty whose text Internet commentators must analyse line by line to unveil certain discrepancy and conspiracy.

Beyond that, there are other certain triggers: if the outlying review score is written by a woman, the proportionate fervour increases. If the woman dislikes some element of the game readers can correlate to her gender – the portrayal of female characters in the game, to use an obvious example – that objection will become shorthand for her entire opinion, even if the review is generally good.

A release the size of *Grand Theft Auto V* is the perfect showcase for this reliable crowd behaviour, and the gaming community met its launch exactly as expected. Carolyn Petit's disappointment with some of the game's misogyny only moderately affected her highly scored Gamespot review, but attracted close to 20,000 comments, most of them outraged, some even abusive. Readers were so eager to disprove misogyny, or censure any complaint thereof, that they surely committed it.

It's strange: a corporate giant publishes a game with a budget of over $260m (that swiftly earns more than $1bn), and gamers act like it needs protection from pesky 'social issues'. In a recent column I said I find it weird that game fans, once creative outsiders, now demand such frenzied loyalty to expensive tech and corporations. I also find it troubling that the word 'misogyny' is such a reliable trigger for consumer rage and defensiveness.

I think I'm finally beginning to understand the misconceptions people have about women who want to talk about misogyny in games, though. The release of *GTAV* brought out a lot of trolls: even before I'd made any comment on the game whatsoever, I received some unsolicited tweets and emails – sometimes addressed to me along with other women who comment on games (Petit, Anita Sarkeesian et al) – protesting that our presumed oversensitivity was an affront to free speech, or that our obsession with 'political correctness' was destructive to a creative medium.

> I think it's safe to say 'sensitivity' or 'offence' aren't at the root of our complaints about misogyny

The presumption that we are an attack force of the offended is an interesting one. I imagine there is a legion of young men out there who see us as Carrie Nation figures – like the militant Prohibitionists that smashed bottles and attacked taverns across America in an attempt to protect its virtue.

Of course, I can't speak for how *all other women* see videogames, but I think it's safe to say that 'sensitivity' or 'offence' aren't at the root of our complaints about misogyny. It's not about arbitrary tokenism, either: I think still more fans and industry people alike think women want to mess up videogames by randomly gender-swapping characters, or sticking in a woman character simply because there 'needs to be one'.

The groundswell of hostility that a *GTA* release can provoke, though, suggests this is still what people think women mean when we talk about our involvement in games. We just want games to be about a broader swathe of the human experience, and half of all human beings are women. But *Grand Theft Auto* is a story about men, I'm told. Yes, it can be that, but why must it *only* be that? Can't everyone agree that more is better, and that different is better too? Especially in an age where most series are about men? That's really what the pursuit of inclusion in games is about, for me: different and new, adventurous and heroic. Why are gamers so righteous about treading the same ground, dredging up every intellectual argument in the book for why new champions and more mature, nuanced attitudes to representing people don't make sense?

I don't need to see myself in every game, I don't need content to be tailored to my preferences, and I don't want anyone to artificially edit their vision to meet a quota. That's not what anyone wants. What I'd rather is to feel that I work in a mature and diverse space, one where people don't throw tantrums about review scores or get into Internet arguments about 'political correctness' when all that's asked for is a consideration of new viewpoints; to add ideas and create alternatives, not adulterate or repress what already is.

One of the biggest challenges for new voices in games is to have that simple wish understood, without it being warped through the angry megaphone of those who'd corrupt what we're saying in order to throw it away. And it's hard to start and sustain these crucial conversations about what non-traditional game audiences want when a defensive uproar arises at any suggestion that any group – women, minorities, anyone – isn't being represented thoughtfully or enough.

I think it's the defensive fanbase, not passionate advocates for change in the games space, who are 'too sensitive' and obsessed with what they believe is 'correct'.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media

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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

A condensed history of the long-running Console Wars, tracing its roots back to ancient Greece

At this late juncture, no one can remember exactly how and why the Console Wars first began, and perhaps only their constant flogging in the media makes it seem like they've been a part a human affairs since the dawn of time. But it's reasonable to assume that before civilisation, the first videogame consoles were just plain rocks, and the Console Wars originated when cavemen started throwing them at each other like a primitive game of *Pong*. Whether fighting over resources, territory or fiercely held differences of opinion on whether rocks should have lots of magical glittery bits stuck in them or be simple to pick up and use, these early warriors set in motion the dream of 'one console to rule them all', which led our world to its current state of absolute ruin.

The first generation of consoles came together in ancient Greece after Archimedes invented the inclined plane, the wheel, the axle, the lever, the pulley, the wedge, the screw and, just for the hell of it, the egg whisk. These inventions primed the agora for competing products by three very different merchant guilds. The Sôny console offered superior technology at a daunting drachma-point, with upwards of 70 pulleys and levers pumping away inside a two-tonne slab of marble. The Mikrosoft console, with its more efficient machinery shelled in a sleek modern amphora, was renowned for its ergonomic handles and strong community experience. And the wildcard console, the Nintendos, was simply a cheap terracotta box, powered by a mouse on a treadmill and controlled, as far as we can tell, with an egg whisk.

Few ancient Greeks could afford all three consoles. The Sôny alone could fill a small stadium and was worth hundreds of slaves – and that was just for the Arcade model; the Elite version was enhanced with enchanted dragon scales and could double as a funerary stele. Hardware makers ignited the Console Wars with inflammatory marketing slogans: "Genesis Does What Nintendoesn't" trumpeted one of many attack ads in the Daily Papyrus cooked up by the Sêga guild, who tried to take over the hardcore sector but wound up abdicating the Console Wars to licenced games about an adorable mascot named Sonos the Vole. "Why did the Vole cross the road?" Nintendos shot back. "To place marker stones commemorating the god Hermes in his priapic form." The reference is obscure now, but it apparently worked, as Nintendos far outlasted its rival.

> The dream of 'one console to rule them all' led our world to its current state of absolute ruin

It was during the Industrial Revolution and beyond that the Console Wars really got interesting. By Victorian times, Sôny was selling a handsome teak-and-brass unit outfitted with the latest in gasworks and its own sewer system, which did not play games but could comfortably house a family of eight. Mikrosoft fielded a stylish, steam-powered console covered in punkish leather plates and meaningless gauges, enhancing its communications power with modern telegraph wires and an internal wet-plate camera process. Nintendos was marketing a hand-cranked console with a Kinetoscope that ran at a dozen frames per minute, whose whimsical titles were almost playable thanks to the invention of the Egg Beater Plus addon.

One need hardly recap the depredations of the 20th century's Console Wars, when a trend towards westernisation caused the three major companies to update their names to their contemporary forms. In short, the advent of the Internet shifted the onus of perpetuating the conflict from the companies to the fans, who avidly took up their new roles as unpaid kamikaze draftees in a vast, pointless psy-war. In my completely unbiased appraisal, you were either a Sony person, who valued processing power above all else in your abject fear of human emotion; a Nintendo person, a magical creature of pure imagination who functioned in the real world despite your irrational fear of complex technology (Nintendo was sticking with the gimmicky egg whisk controls, poorly disguised as a Nunchuk); or a Microsoft person, a well-adjusted and good-looking citizen who occupied the sensible middle.

To be sure, there was slight justification for such fierce partisanship, as the popularity of your favourite console influenced its exclusives and its triple-A library. But was that worth all the rancour, the endless bullet-point skirmishes, the desolation and destruction that have characterised the 21st century? As we all know, the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One took the Console Wars to the next level when they evolved into semi-sentient war machines, engaging each other in mecha battles across the continents, piloted by message-board trolls with unhealthy post counts and mortality rates equivalent to *Advance Wars* infantrymen. Couldn't this have been avoided if everyone had simply played the console they liked and not worried about other people liking other things? At least Nintendo dropped out of the battle when its final console, the Wii U, became culturally adapted to all kinds of non-gaming functions, from exercise instruction and body fat monitoring to whipping up a delightful soufflé.

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

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H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

48 **Dark Souls II**
360, PC, PS3

52 **Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain**
360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One

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56 **Deep Down**
PS4

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62 **Crimson Dragon**
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Something about Japan



This generation will be remembered as the one in which Japan fell. Unable to match the budgets of western studios or appeal to the palates of western players, the country's game industry spent the seventh generation of consoles becoming steadily more insular. Japanese studios, by and large, now make Japanese games for Japanese players, and most of their attempts to cater for western audiences fall flat. The coming generation, then, represents an opportunity: a fresh start with new hardware. The Tokyo Game Show revealed much about how Japan's industry intends to capitalise on it. To most, the west continues to be a heavy source of inspiration.

PS4-exclusive dungeon crawler *Deep Down* (p56) is a next-gen graphical showcase, but Capcom draws inspiration from *League Of Legends*' business model and *Minecraft*'s procedural generation. For *Metal Gear Solid V* (p52) it's an open world, *Far Cry 3*'s camera, Rockstar's horses and a western voice actor in Kiefer Sutherland.

Others are at it too. In what seems like a clear nod to *The Walking Dead*, *Deadly Premonition* creator Swery65 is making a cel-shaded episodic mystery in *D4* (p58). Keiji Inafune is putting forward his solution to the Japanese industry's woes with *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* (p54). It's zombies, for some reason.

Yet amid this naked courting of the west, one studio holds firm. FromSoftware's *Dark Souls II* (p48) is, like the games that preceded it, borne not from the desire to appeal to a certain audience, but from a singular, unshakeable vision. Despite that early talk of accessibility, the third *Souls* game seems every bit as punishing as its predecessors, albeit with some of the mechanical kinks ironed out and a greater focus on network play. Details on the imminent multiplayer beta were the most exciting thing to come out of TGS 2013; great news for us, perhaps, but not for those who think the way into western players' hearts is by aping the games we already have.

MOST WANTED

Half-Life 3 PC
It's coming. Valve's Steam Machine teases may not have yielded the reveal everyone wanted, but *Half-Life 3*'s appearance on a list of in-development projects was the real deal. And after the role *Half-Life 2* played in getting Steam onto our PCs, what better boost for SteamOS?

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft iPad, Mac, PC
A closed PC beta shows how far Blizzard's card battler has come since its PAX East unveiling, and now that custom deck building is in we've found ourselves daydreaming about new loadouts. It'll be an absolute delight on a touchscreen.

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds 3DS
As if attempting to live up to the legacy of *A Link To The Past* wasn't pressure enough, Nintendo is brazenly shaking up the *Zelda* format with item rentals, enabling us to tackle *A Link Between Worlds*' dungeons in any order.



DARK SOULS II

Prepare to die, die and die again in FromSoftware's expanded sequel

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Japan
Release March

We didn't see this particular ghoul emerge in our hands-on time with the game. Perhaps he's waiting for the beta to finally gnaw your character's flesh off the bone



An intentionality of design has long been a hallmark of the *Dark Souls* series. Every environment and structure feels purpose-built. Enemies are painstakingly arranged, like chess pieces on a board, always perched on their original mark when you respawn after death. Discoverable items are frequently placed in specific locations based on opaque lore considerations.

This deliberate approach to design makes scrutinising a *Dark Souls II* demo that much more enjoyable. You can begin with the assumption that every part of the demo exists for a reason, to communicate some specific aesthetic or gameplay ideal, and quickly get on with the business of puzzling out what those purposes might be.

One of the themes telegraphed throughout what we've played of *Dark Souls II* is that it aspires to be far more of a prankster than either of its predecessors. Nearly every single frame features a booby trap or gotcha of some description. The benign-looking corpse that climbs to its feet when you approach appears so many times over the course of the demo that it risks becoming a cliché.

The hulking frame of a foe called the Turtle Knight tempts you into circle-strafing him to attack his posterior – surely he'll be sluggish in spinning around to deflect your attack? – only to surprise you by flopping backwards onto his shell, crushing you flat. In the same vein, a number of the statues lining the bridge connecting the final bonfire and the Mirror Knight boss will lurch to their feet and attack, unless you can preemptively smash their heads off before they come to life.

"Gimmicks such as these are important elements and characteristics to the *Dark Souls* series," *Dark Souls II* co-director **Yui Tanimura** tells us, "and are something we prioritise for *Dark Souls II* as well. We feel it is important to enjoy the variety of deaths one faces and we want to emphasise this throughout the game."



FromSoftware's Yui Tanimura, co-director of *Dark Souls II*

It's a fascinating reversal, this notion of death morphing from fail state to a kind of fan service, like jump scares in a teen-horror flick. But the variety of deaths in *Dark Souls II* doesn't just comprise the obvious snares mentioned earlier. Over the course of several playthroughs, we found enemy movesets to be noticeably broader than previous games where each opponent might have a total of three distinct attacks. This wider arsenal can easily knock you off balance.

Just when you think you've mentally catalogued an enemy's entire set of potential attacks, they produce yet another – and almost always at the most inopportune moment. This means the number of combat variables players must keep in their heads increases exponentially. The kilted demon



Be thankful that you're not marching into the punishing world of *Dark Souls II* with only a longsword to your name. The game's designers have bestowed you with a third weapon slot to boost your chances of survival





FromSoftware has assured us there'll be coastal areas in this game, which should introduce a wider variety of aquatic threats than *Dark Souls*' water-spitting Hydras

statues preceding the Mirror Knight are a prime example: after wrongly assuming we'd seen all they had to offer, one unleashed a close-quarters roundhouse kick that left us vulnerable to his colleagues' finishing blows.

In the interest of fairness, players now have additional tools at their disposal. The Temple Knight class has an additional weapon slot, bringing the total to three, which allowed us to alternate between a halberd, an axe and a magic catalyst that resembled a bell. And a new class of items called Lifegems will rapidly restore health for several seconds, and are only partially interrupted if you sustain damage midway through the replenishment.

The usefulness of lock-on targeting with enemies has been nullified in the case of select weapons. We were surprised to find that the swing of the Warrior's enormous two-handed blade depended on the direction

> ***It's clear the game wants to make you mutter, curse and fume – just like the old days***

in which we pressed the left analogue stick, regardless of existing lock-on reticules that happened to be active. If this is indicative of a more sweeping revision, certain powerful weapons will also take more precise player guidance to wield effectively.

In the room following the mid-demo bonfire warp, we discover an image of a tree, with its root system exposed, carved into the wall. When we ask Tanimura to elaborate on its significance to *Dark Souls II*'s intricacies, he confirms that the image is "important to the lore of the game" but that the development team isn't prepared to reveal anything further at this time. How very *Dark Souls*.

When asked if the relatively short distance between the bonfire and the Mirror Knight boss fight was a concession made expressly for the demo, or indicative of a conscious effort to cut back on the dead air resulting from gruelling treks back to retry boss fights in *Dark Souls*, Tanimura whips out a serrated Jagged Ghost Blade from behind his back and slices off our tightly crossed fingers. "This was specially tuned specifically for the playable build," he says.

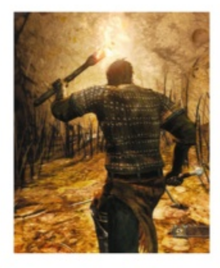
"For the final retail version, this will depend on the concept of the individual level designs. For example, it may be a long distance to the boss but shortcuts may help the journey, or if one is able to find a hidden bonfire, the distance may shorten but the enemies may be extremely strong. These are not final decisions – but again, it will depend on the concepts of the level designs."

By the time you read this the *Dark Souls II* network test beta will be underway, placing participants in a wooded location called Huntsman's Copse. New details from September's Tokyo Game Show reveal that it will contain six pre-built characters: Warrior, Soldier, Sorcerer, Temple Knight, Dual Swordsman and Hunter. Your chosen starting character class in *Dark Souls* was a fairly meaningless distinction given the game's wide-open levelling flexibility, and From has no plans to change course in the sequel. "We feel that binding players to a character class chosen at the beginning takes away from the freedom of gameplay and goes against our game creation concepts," Tanimura says.

Another key change involves the lack of immunity to having your game world invaded by other players when in a hollow (undead) state. In *Dark Souls*, players could avoid intrusion by other players by simply not restoring their human form at bonfires. No longer: if the idea of another player bursting into your world and hunting you down like a piece of quarry makes you squeamish, you'd best be prepared to sever your Ethernet cable. With *Dark Souls II* moving to dedicated servers, it's as if From simply wants to showcase the seamlessness of its improved online experience – whether you want it showcased to you or not.

In case you were still concerned about everything in this sequel being streamlined to eliminate friction, it's clear the game still wants to make you mutter and curse and fume – just like the bad old days that *Souls* players love pining after. For those keeping score at home, Tanimura says the team is "approximately 70 per cent complete in the development process". Not long to go now. ■





In the air

A successful run through the *Dark Souls II* demo takes around 25 minutes, but there isn't a vast amount of terrain to explore. Even in those modest confines, though, FromSoftware packs in plenty of variety. The feature uniting each one seems to be the new emphasis on particle effects. In the fire-filled chamber near the start, sparks and cinders hover. In the dark passage you venture into, torch in hand, tiny glistening specks float by the camera. And in the frozen passage leading to the Mirror Knight, flurries of snow gust through shattered windows.







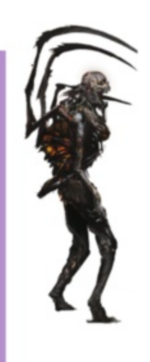


TOP **The network test beta will take place in a wooded area called Huntsman's Copse. No threat of ambush in those woods – none at all.** ABOVE ***Dark Souls II* will allow you to warp between bonfires from the very start of the game, which could diminish euphoria over unlocked map shortcuts.** TOP LEFT **Even an enemy carrying a simple weapon, such as a wooden club, can make short work of you if you're not on your guard**





LEFT **Glowing red enemies used to signal an invading phantom, but *Dark Souls II* has a variety of such enemies that are more powerful versions of their (non-red) counterparts**



Publisher Konami
Developer Kojima Productions
Format 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release TBA





METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Snake's world opens up

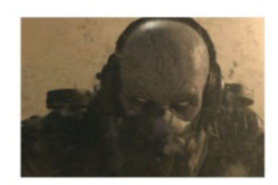
Snake's moveset is inherited from a variety of *MGS* games. He can hide bodies, interrogate guards, duck into long grass, dive at enemies to throw off their aim, and flatten himself against walls to avoid detection

Hideo Kojima is jovial and giggly in front of his home crowd at the Tokyo Game Show, addressing the crowd in Japanese and leaving gaps between his words for the two other people on stage at Sony's stand – a voice actor and a host in a hat – to make incredulous noises in his direction. They laugh a lot, and they're joined in their mirth by the 200-strong audience gathered around the PlayStation 4 stand to see the next *Metal Gear Solid* running on next-gen hardware.

MGSV is subtitled *The Phantom Pain*, but the section Kojima showed at TGS has a separate suffix – *Ground Zeroes* – and acts as a prologue to the events of *The Phantom Pain*. It's set one year after the events of PSP's *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, and it's that game on which *MGSV* most looks to draw for both story and mechanics. Snake starts the mission on a rocky, rainy hillside, overlooking the Camp Omega base. A few moments earlier, the base had played host to the horrifically burned Skull Face, leader of the XOF military group that stands as a perversion to Snake's own FOX Unit. Through cutscenes we watch as Skull Face patrols the base, stopping at a prison cage containing a young man, *Peace Walker*'s Chico. Skull Face throws him a Walkman and prowls off, climbing aboard a helicopter and barking cryptic orders. We're still not quite sure who Skull Face is.

We do know who Snake is, though. He's the Big Boss incarnation of the character, the same Snake who played the lead role in *Snake Eater* and *Peace Walker*. He's got most of those games' tools – including support from *Peace Walker*'s Kaz Miller – as well as a new set of toys. Most game-changing of these is a set of binoculars that allows players to tag spotted enemies, keeping them visible through





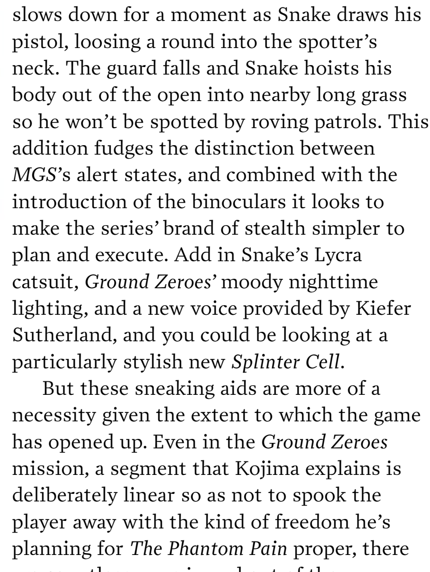
TOP **Eli is described as 'a youth who curses his fate', but many *Metal Gear Solid* sages see him as a young Liquid Snake. *The Phantom Pain*'s own Snake spots him as he's rescuing Kaz Miller from Afghanistan.**
ABOVE **These Ghost 02 soldiers are suffixed 'those who don't exist' on *The Phantom Pain*'s trailers, suggesting that they're black ops forces who've been experimented on – or grown – to leap higher and run faster than normal humans.**
LEFT **The nine-year gap between *Ground Zeroes* and the rest of *The Phantom Pain* is explained by Snake being in a coma. This, presumably, is when his DNA is taken to produce clones Solid, Liquid, and Solidus Snake**





Snake spends nine years in a coma after the events of *Ground Zeroes*. When he wakes, he's given the moniker Punished Snake, perhaps explaining how he came to be the antagonist in 1987's original *Metal Gear*





objects and walls in what seems like a clear nod to *Far Cry 3*'s camera. Kojima shows how this change will make Snake's sneaking missions easier, scanning the base from a hilltop before engineering a route into the compound that dodges most of the red figures now clearly marked onscreen.

Most, but not all: on his way in, Snake is spotted by an untagged guard. Time slows down for a moment as Snake draws his pistol, loosing a round into the spotter's neck. The guard falls and Snake hoists his body out of the open into nearby long grass so he won't be spotted by roving patrols. This addition fudges the distinction between *MGS*'s alert states, and combined with the introduction of the binoculars it looks to make the series' brand of stealth simpler to plan and execute. Add in Snake's Lycra catsuit, *Ground Zeroes'* moody nighttime lighting, and a new voice provided by Kiefer Sutherland, and you could be looking at a particularly stylish new *Splinter Cell*.

But these sneaking aids are more of a necessity given the extent to which the game has opened up. Even in the *Ground Zeroes* mission, a segment that Kojima explains is deliberately linear so as not to spook the player away with the kind of freedom he's planning for *The Phantom Pain* proper, there are countless ways in and out of the compound – holes in fences, side entrances, even front doors. Kojima places the blame for this shift purely on technology, explaining that each *MGS* game moved steadily further away from a central base as console technology advanced to the point where he could finally render the world outside.

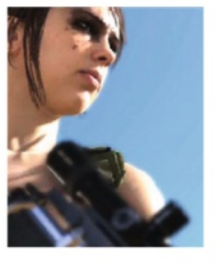
As for ways back out, Snake can now call in a helicopter for extraction. The landing zone can be chosen by the player, but Kojima explains that if enemies on the ground have explosive weaponry, that chopper can be brought down. In his *Ground Zeroes* demo, he asks the pilot to set down on a cliff, far enough away that he can sling the rescued Chico into the chopper before turning around and warning off pursuing guards with a few rounds from Snake's assault rifle.

The helicopter extraction – and the existence of Kaz Miller – indicate a return for *Peace Walker*'s Mother Base, the structure that acted as home for Snake's Militaires Sans Frontières organisation. Players will have access to such a base, but Kojima is typically coy about exactly how it'll work, suggesting only that players will be able to specialise their homes – allowing multi-chopper support on extraction, for instance.

Sneaking aids are more of a necessity given the amount that the game has opened up

How players will recruit for their private army, or if they even have one, is yet to be made clear. In *Peace Walker*, Snake would tie balloons to chosen victims, forcibly whisking them off to a new job at Mother Base; in *Ground Zeroes*, he has no such option for subdued soldiers. Instead, he can knock them out, cut their throat or interrogate them – with the last option allowing him to clarify the location of assets or objectives in the large, open-plan areas.

It's those open areas that are *MGSV*'s most exciting element, and the reason why Kojima has every right to be giddy on stage. Snake was previously hamstrung by technology – both in-game and in the developer's real world – but *MGSV* looks to give both super-soldier and super-developer the tools to complete the tactical sneaking mission they've always wanted. ■



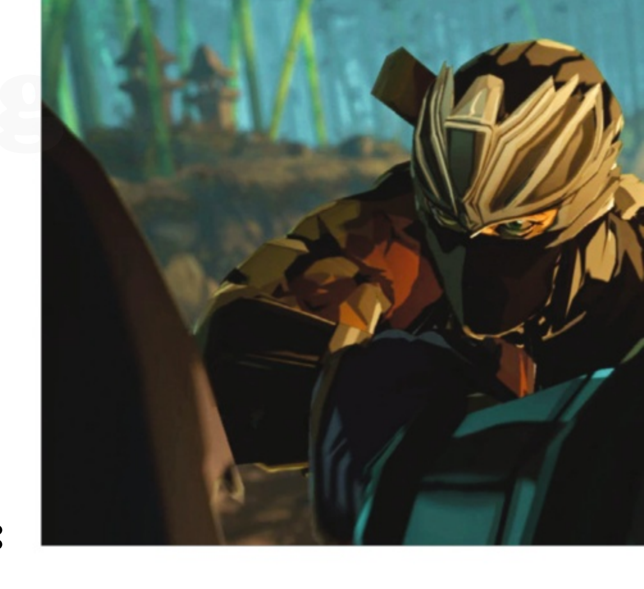
Painful transition

Ground Zeroes takes place a year after *Peace Walker*, but the rest of *The Phantom Pain* takes place nine years after that. That places its timeline in the 1980s, allowing for conceivable character crossover between *Metal Gear Solids 1* and *2*, and the '60s- and '70s-set *Snake Eater* and *Peace Walker*. Joining them is a cast of characters that include Skull Face and Quiet. The former has intrigued series devotees, who suggest he could be anyone from *MGS3*'s Raikov to *MGS1*'s Psycho Mantis. Quiet has attracted some complaints about her hugely impractical attire: a too-small bikini and ripped fishnet stockings aren't ideal armour for a sniper.

BELOW **Travelling between missions has been made easier with horses and vehicles. During his *TGS* demonstration, Kojima commandeers a jeep inside the enemy compound, attracting attention but making escape easier**







Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Spark Unlimited
Format 360, iOS, PS3
Origin US
Release Q2 2014



The Japanese industry has long borrowed from manga and anime for visual inspiration. On the evidence of this year's TGS, it's a trend that seems set to continue, as evidenced by *Yaiba*, *Crimson Dragon* and *D4*

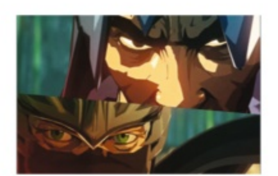
YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z

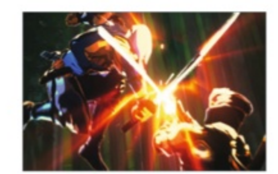
Saving the Japanese industry one rotting limb at a time

Capcom legend **Keiji Inafune** looked around the 2009 Tokyo Game Show and issued a bold condemnation of the state of play in his home nation. "Man, Japan is over," he said. "We're done. Our game industry is finished." The problem he saw was the failure to appeal to a global audience, without which Japanese studios could never hope to match the success of their western peers. In the intervening four years, Inafune has left Capcom, set up on his own studio, and here, at the 2013 Tokyo Game Show, he's showing off *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*. It's a Tecmo-published action game in a very Japanese series that's being overseen by Team Ninja and developed by a western studio, with Inafune calling the shots. It's time, then, for him to put his money where his mouth is.

And this man, who claims to understand the tastes of western players, is putting his money on zombies. "I wanted to do a ninja game, and thought it would be cool to merge ninjas and zombies," he tells us. "That would be a fun game and, of course, the top ninja game out there is *Ninja Gaiden*. I thought it would be cool to have a rival character for Ryu Hayabusa, and that was really the start of Yaiba. I proposed that to Tecmo Koei and Team Ninja, and they were open to the idea. And, of course, I have plenty of experience with zombie games as well as action games, so that combination of Team Ninja and me, we knew that would make a strong title."

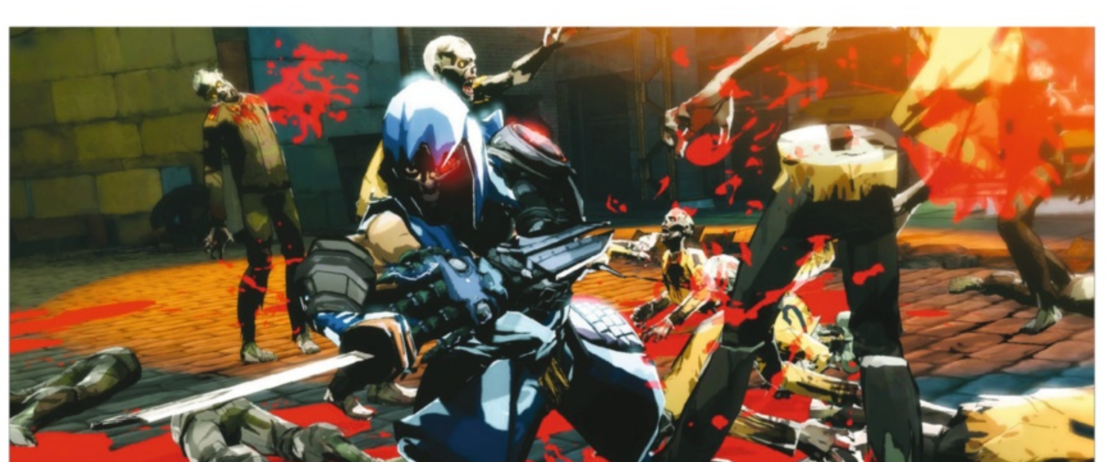
But Team Ninja isn't developing the game. Inafune hopes a western studio will be better equipped to make games with more global appeal – after all, Capcom liked *Dead Rising 2* developer Blue Castle Games so much that it bought the company, renaming it Capcom Vancouver, which is currently making *Dead*





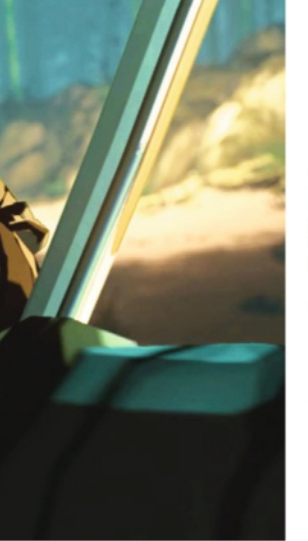
ABOVE **Yaiba takes on series staple Ryu Hayabusa in the game's prologue, and comes off worse. His death is in true anime style, standing still for several seconds after the fatal blow before coming apart at the seams**

The first *Ninja Gaiden* was censored in the west, its gory decapitations deemed too much for delicate European sensibilities. Lord only knows what the censors will make of scenes like this





Keiji Inafune is the CEO of Comcept





LEFT **Yaiba retains Hayabusa's hunched walk cycle, but he moves a good deal faster. There's quite the difference between him and his undead opponents in terms of speed**



TOP **Recasting Hayabusa as antagonist is a logical move for a game that takes *Ninja Gaiden* as a jumping-off point, not a template.** ABOVE **Yaiba's bionic arm can be charged up for rocket punches, and can grab enemies and use them as makeshift weapons, twirling them around for crowd control, which is essential given the enemy counts**

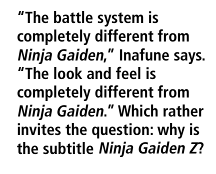
Rising 3 for Xbox One. Inafune's choice, however, is an odd one: Spark Unlimited, developer of such non-gems as *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty*, *Legendary* and *Lost Planet 3*.

"Spark was my idea; I brought them to the table," Inafune says. "What was important was to find a studio that was willing to learn. It doesn't matter what the [studio's] past scores, the past sales, were. You can't judge the studio just by that. And I worked with Spark while I was at Capcom, so I know them, know what they're capable of. I know they are open to these kinds of collaborations, very willing to learn and very dedicated to improving their craft. And with that dedication and that open-mindedness, that's how you get a good, original game."

The combination of zombies, an established IP and a poorly regarded developer may not sound either good or original, but there are a few deviations from the various formulae in the mix here. *Ninja Gaiden*'s realistic visuals are gone, and in their place is a thickly inked, cel-shaded style that gives a fitting comic book look to a game that takes the series' bloodlust to ridiculous new levels. Normal frontman Ryu Hayabusa has a limited, if crucial, role, killing the titular ninja Yaiba Kamikaze. Our new protagonist is subsequently brought back to life as a cyborg by a corporation that promises him the power he needs to take his revenge, but only on the condition that he'll first handle a pesky zombie uprising. But the biggest departure of all is the combat, which casts off *Ninja Gaiden*'s punishing precision and replaces it with a much simpler system. The shuffling undead in *Yaiba* are no match for the smart AI of *Gaidens* past, and it seems combat here will be about managing enemy numbers rather than intelligence. Inafune assures us there will be plenty of depth for hardened players to mine, but the presence of QTEs is troubling, as is the drift away from pure action towards puzzle-solving and platforming.

The presence of QTEs is troubling, as is the drift away from pure action

There are some fresh ideas: rather than being collectible, weapons are fashioned from the limbs of Yaiba's fallen foes, with one hulking zombie's arms forming a makeshift pair of nunchucks. It's pleasingly gory, too, with fountains of claret splashing against the camera lens and frequently obscuring the action. Yet it's hard to shake the disappointment that, for all his bluster, Inafune's apparent solution to the Japanese industry's woes involves zombies, a studio with a poor track record, and sacrificing depth at the altar of spectacle. With this coming so soon after the lacklustre *Ninja Gaiden 3* – which also sought an expanded audience by paring back complexity – maybe it's Ryu Hayabusa, not Yaiba, who's the dead one. ■

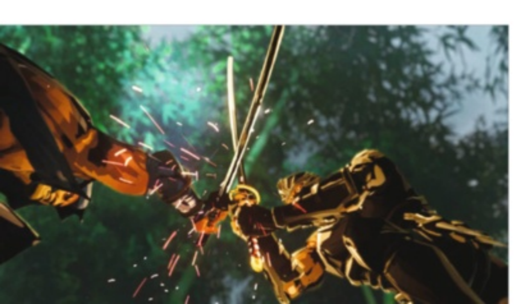


"The battle system is completely different from *Ninja Gaiden*," Inafune says. "The look and feel is completely different from *Ninja Gaiden*." Which rather invites the question: why is the subtitle *Ninja Gaiden Z*?



Raising hell

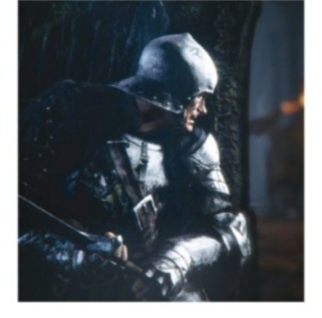
Inafune's thirst for collaboration doesn't just mean leaning on western studios; he takes an active role in nurturing the future of Japanese development, too. Through the Inafune Academy, he mentors four young devs a week on how games are pitched and produced. He's also a frequent speaker at universities and on the convention circuit. "Even though I've been in the game industry for 27 years, and I'm still trying to work as a game creator myself, I do feel it's important to give back to new creators," he says. "Hopefully, they'll raise the next generation after them and through that good, virtuous cycle we'll have even better games."



Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release TBC 2014







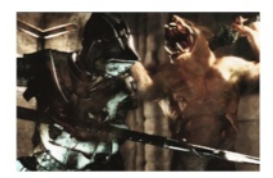
DEEP DOWN

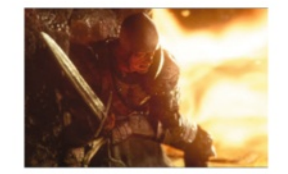
Capcom's bold experiment in next-gen dungeoneering

What exactly is *Deep Down*? After a few hands-on sessions and a gameplay demonstration led by executive producer Yoshinori Ono at September's Tokyo Game Show, we're still not entirely sure. At first, Capcom's PS4-exclusive dungeon crawler appeared to be its take on *Dark Souls*. Then a 2094 New York meta-setting was introduced in a setup similar to *Assassin's Creed*'s Animus. The demo we played, meanwhile, was a procedurally generated loot hunter. And Ono announced it will be a free-to-play online title with fourplayer monster hunting. Clearly it is first and foremost an experiment, an outing for the new Panta Rhei engine, and its arresting use of lighting and physics effects are being slowly shaped into a full game.

One thing's for sure: *Deep Down* looks great. Sources of light are everywhere in the game, spanning from the deadly, such as the engulfing flames hurled at you by dragons, ogres and pivoting stone traps, to the beneficial, like the glowing Memento relics that enable your Raven knight to read memories from the past, triggering eerily plaintive voiceovers that will supposedly form a mystery in need of solving. Light peeks through cracks in the dungeon walls, dances in the billows of dust thrown up when the ground occasionally crumbles beneath you, and spirals out of the teleportation gates that transport you from dungeon to dungeon. It illuminates the large character models and hard stone surroundings, which look crisp and solid on *Deep Down*'s host platform.

Each stage is generated at not-quite random, using algorithms designed to ensure that the dungeon is not totally unplayable. The dank pathways and open halls are created





ABOVE **Combat is a mixture of pike-based stabbing and magic/skill-casting, with monsters taking damage and acting differently depending on where you hit them**

BELOW **Up to four friends will be able to face off against monsters online, as Ono demonstrated during his TGS stage presentation**





Executive producer Yoshinori Ono



The game's advanced lighting effects are among its star features, with the Panta Rhei engine promising visuals so real they'll all but singe your eyebrows

as you warp in, and a map is available to summon at any time with a click of DualShock 4's touchpad.

Each dungeon we played at TGS took about five minutes to explore, with treasure chests hidden down pit traps and behind moving walls. But it was battle that gummed our progress. Taking on one of the demo's lumbering ogres at a time isn't too taxing: L2 puts you into a slightly zoomed aiming mode, while R2 and R1 unleash strong and weak lunges with your pike. Movement feels slow and heavy, even when holding L1 to dash, but soon we were hobbling beasts with a poke to the knee before going in for damaging blows to the head. A life bar and hitpoint readout count down the enemy's health to zero.

But once foes start ganging up on you – we regularly encountered four ogres at once, along with a flame-spitting pedestal trap – the tight tunnels become claustrophobic. To ease the pressure, it's time to use your skills and magic items, which can be customised from a large selection and cycled through using the D-pad. Unleash deadly pocket tornadoes and spin-dash attacks with either Square or Triangle and watch those particle effects go haywire, but take it easy, because uses are limited and top-ups are scarce.

We died a number of times during our first session, overwhelmed at close quarters by pure numbers, but the game offers a quick restart that respawns you where you fell. There is also a Casual Mode in which you cannot die. Ono said during his TGS stage presentation that he hopes players of all skill levels will be able to play through to the end.

In Ono's demo of the game's fourplayer co-op, we saw a team of knights bring down the flame-bellowing dragon we first saw in the reveal trailer at PS4's unveiling. One captivating moment came when a player deployed a series of ice shields to block the fire attacks, then used a spell to freeze time, stopping the dragon and all the other players in their tracks as he continued to move around. Held in freeze frame as the player circled the camera around them, the chunks of debris scattered by the dragon's broiling breath and the plume of fire itself looked almost tangible. The player then lined up a few fireballs, which also hung in the air until time came crashing back in, sending the projectiles hurtling at the befuddled dragon and ending the battle.

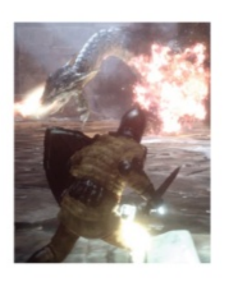
Once foes start ganging up on you, the tight tunnels become claustrophobic

Ono has said that Panta Rhei was built in tandem with the game, and after extensive conversations with Sony to nail down its target hardware specs. MT Framework was already a versatile engine, but Panta Rhei is a new advancement that's tailor-made for the coming generation. Capcom is also new to the free-to-play market, though at TGS it announced another F2P title called *Blade Fantasia*, a smartphone RPG. Clearly this is an area on which Capcom is keeping a close eye.

So the hardware is new, the engine is new, the IP is new and, for its publisher, the distribution model is new. From what we've seen so far, *Deep Down*'s gameplay is basic but still feels fresh. It's a strange balance of dynamics and mechanics, echoing games you've seen before but not really rehashing them. As the game continues to evolve in ways perhaps unforeseen even to Capcom (the team is working towards an open beta soon after PS4's Japanese launch in February), it may change again entirely, its structure as unpredictable as one of its own dungeons. ■



The game's story revolves around the Ravens, a shadowy group from 2094 who explore mysteries 600 years in the past by tapping into leftover memories



Waiting game

Next-gen hardware was the top draw at the Tokyo Game Show, and with no new *Monster Hunter* title on Capcom's booth – the latest Wii U instalment was released just a few days before the event – *Deep Down* became the de facto must-play game. But the bite-size demo (made up of short singleplayer dungeon sections only) left a mixed impression. Some players we spoke to said they felt the game's sumptuous graphics gave them a proper taste of next-gen hardware, while others seemed to be scratching their heads, unsure what to make of a game that is far from completion. Still more gave up on the 100-minute lines to play *Knack*, *Killzone* or *Octodad* instead.



Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Access Games
Format Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release TBA



D4

Swery's madness goes next gen in this twisted episodic mystery

Oh boy. We've no idea why it's taken so long for someone to make a game that plays like a series of Quantum Leap, but *D4*, **Hidetaka 'Swery65' Suehiro**'s bonkers crime drama, is just that. Stepping into past memories one episode at a time, pretty-boy detective David Young hopes to track down the killer of his wife, Peggy, whose dying clue was to look for 'D' and alter history so that she can come back to him. So far, so grim. But the director of *Deadly Premonition* was hardly likely to serve up a game without humour and oddball characterisation, and it is in embracing both that *D4* – which stands for Dark Dreams Don't Die – veers sharply off the conventional track.



Hidetaka Suehiro, director/producer, Access Games

For one thing, the game has been built from the ground up for Kinect 2.0. "The original Kinect was enough for me to come up with the basic concept," Suehiro says, "but Kinect 2.0 is indispensable for giving more fidelity of control." He also believes that the updated version of the peripheral allows for extra player immersion. "You can get closer to the TV now, and you can play in the dark. And since Kinect can read facial expressions, you can [involve empathy] more."

During the exploration sections of the game – we see a level set inside an aeroplane cabin – your hand movements highlight items on the screen in the same manner as a point-and-click adventure. Close your hand on an item to select it, swipe to turn the camera and, cutely, point two fingers at the screen like a gun to move forward when a footsteps icon indicates that there's the option to do so. Touch your 'glasses' to activate a *Batman: Arkham City*-style enhanced vision mode that highlights objects that might warrant a closer look. Occasional splitscreen cutaways, meanwhile, lend an air of '70s buddy-cop TV drama to proceedings.



D4's action scenes play out like a Kinect rhythm game, rewarding the player for swiping their hands along with the prompts and mimicking poses that appear in the top-right corner

As you chat with the air stewardess and other passengers in your search for clues as to the whereabouts of D, conversation trees offer various paths for interrogation. Choose the one closest to how Young would think to fill your Synchro Gauge, which is useful in the action scenes. These are also where things get truly loopy. Suddenly, you're playing a rhythm-action game, swiping your hands in time to the onscreen prompts. In this case, we guide Young as he roughhouses with suspicious fellow passenger Antonio Zapata, dispensing lines of cheesy detective-drama dialogue over a high-octane soundtrack.

Every now and then, a Synchro Stunt is activated, with an icon indicating some tricky body contortion position for you to throw yourself into. These allow for some of the demo's maddest moments; Young dances a lady passenger out of harm's way, for instance, and bats away a baseball thrown at him by Zapata using a discarded mannequin leg.

> ***"Each episode will always have a climax and conclusion, like episodes of a TV drama"***

What about the wider arc? "Along with solving the mystery of Peggy's death and the identity of D, you'll also learn why Young has suddenly been gifted with his supernatural powers," Suehiro says. Each episode will present Young at a different time in his life while he explores the past to rearrange the present. "We haven't decided [on] the number of episodes yet, but each episode will always have a climax and conclusion, like episodes of a TV drama. You won't even have to play them in sequence."

Swery tells us that the game will be entirely playable with a controller if you're "embarrassed" by Kinect. But as one of the most creative-looking uses for the device to date, a gamepad seems like the dull option when you're leaping into Young's weird world of time-warp detective work and taking the serious with the seriously strange. ■



Cel-shades of grey

D4 looks to be as off-the-wall as Suehiro's previous work, but he explains its use of anime-like visuals straightforwardly. "Japan is well known for its anime, so this style felt like a good blend for a Japanese studio working with an American publisher, Microsoft. Also, the game will be split into episodes, and if it proves popular we might continue making them for a long time, so anime-based visuals will allow us to keep the same art style further down the road, regardless of changes in tech. On the next-gen consoles there are many games with super-realistic graphics; when you line up all those screenshots, you'll be able to recognise *D4* immediately."



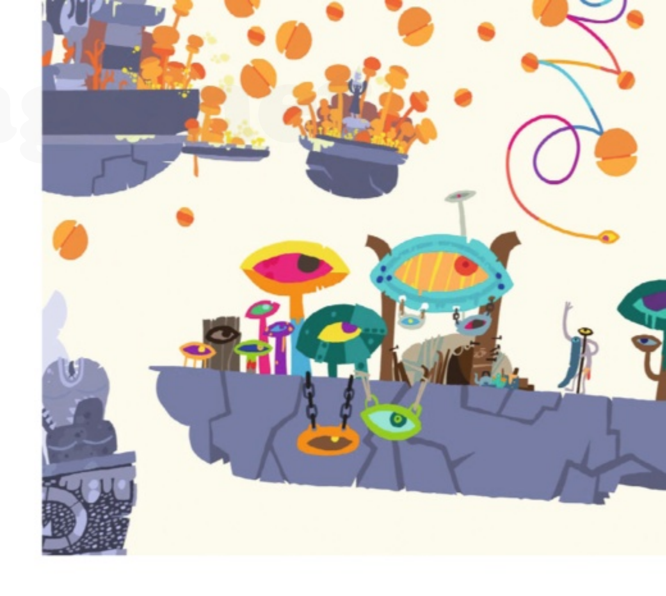


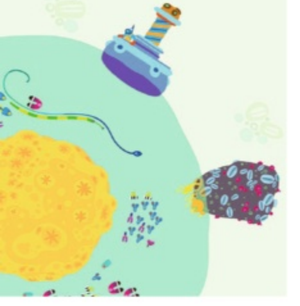
ABOVE **Although it explores serious themes of murder, justice and revenge, *D4* knows when to poke fun at itself, with action scenes in particular offering a dose of colourful surreal humour**

ABOVE **Air stewardess Olivia Jones may seem like a random acquaintance when she appears, but why does she remind Young so much of his murdered wife, Peggy?** RIGHT **Plunged into misery by the death of his wife, Young discovers he has new-found supernatural powers – and a hankering for revenge to go along with them**



Publisher SCE
Developer Honeyslug, Richard Hogg
Format PS3, PS4, Vita
Origin UK
Release 2014





HOHOKUM

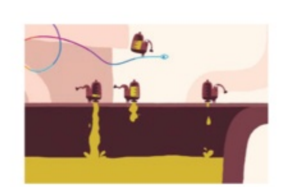
Honeyslug's oddball project dazzles both the eyes and ears

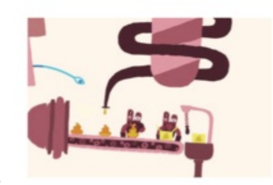
Every creature populating the world of *Hohokum* appears to have hatched from Skittles incubating under a magical heat lamp. Yet because it's so rewarding to fly around and soak up the offbeat visuals, the inscrutability of the game's objectives never feels threatening. You simply steer the Long Mover – a colourful cyclopean snake – around, seeing what there is to see, doing what there is to do. You can't die, and there's no timer counting down. Just go with it, *Hohokum* seems to say. Don't worry, have fun.

"The game's art itself is a bit like a doodle you'd draw while on the telephone, and the gameplay can be that way as well," says artist/designer **Richard Hogg**. "I've been trying to reclaim the word 'aimless' as a positive thing. We're not allowed to use the word 'whimsical' – it's so played out right now. Anything that's not *Call Of Duty* is whimsical."

One of the walls in Honeyslug's North London office contains several patches of fluorescent Post-it Notes. The grid running along this to-do wall represents the various areas that make up the *Hohokum* universe. Even though Hogg and his game-making partner **Ricky Haggett**, the lead programmer and founder of Honeyslug, have ostensibly taken a break from work to watch us play, Hogg's game ideas keep floating to the surface like bubbles in a fizzy drink.

What if you unlocked a trophy in *Hohokum* as a reward for switching off your trophy notifications? What if an area contained zones that would mute game audio completely when you flew into them, unmuting only when you leave? What if there was a puzzle in the game that could only be completed by setting down the controller and letting inertia take over for a few seconds? Haggett offers a succinct,





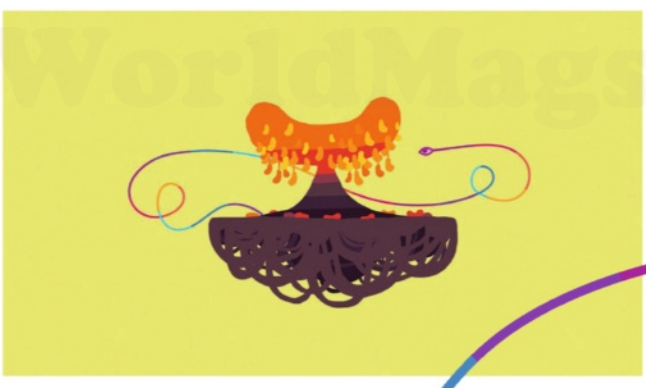
TOP **Once you've helped these creatures fill up their storage tanks with guano, watching them expel it is an odd mix of cute and gross.** ABOVE **There are humorous details everywhere, such as these workers at the guano factory packaging the bat poo in neat little boxes**

BELOW **Videogames have taught us what to do with invitingly fragile clay pots. *Hohokum* is no exception**











LEFT **The floating orange debris in this area behaves like bumper posts in a pinball machine. Prepare to ricochet madly around the screen during this level**

thoughtful appraisal of each of these ideas as they surface over the course of the afternoon and reminds Hogg to write them on Post-it Notes for the wall. Hogg admits to having a phobia of stickers and hates touching adhesive surfaces. It's doubtful anybody has suffered for their art in precisely this fashion before.

We're currently flying around a stage called The Guano Factory. Then again, we only know it's called The Guano Factory because that was the name of a recent trailer depicting the level. Apart from the minimal text needed on the opening screen to help players launch the game, Haggett assures us there are no plans to include any explanatory text – not even to spell out the names of the various places you'll visit.

Flying insects that look like bizarro-world bees harvest the bat faeces that has accumulated on the stage floor and carry it into the air. Using DualShock 4's left analogue stick, we fly around a gnarled mass of pipes and industrial machinery. There are three long-snouted guano collectors scattered about the stage with storage tanks strapped to them. As we soar past these workers, they instinctively leap atop our backs, allowing us to carry them into the air to where the insects are buzzing about, droplets of collected guano dangling from the bugs' bodies. Flying past the insects causes the collectors to slurp the goo into their snouts, adding a few extra drops to their storage tanks.

Production at the Guano Factory isn't going so well. You can see a little boss man tucked away in his tiny office inside the machinery. Behind him, a crude line graph zigzags in a troubling downward slant. A giant receptacle at the mouth of a machine that looks like an upside-down bell has a small pool of guano at the bottom of it. The solution is clear: bring more poop!

For that, we must rouse more of the insects hidden around the stage into flight so that the collectors can fill up their tanks. Then we wiggle our way towards the rim of the main guano receptacle, at which point the passengers on our back leap off and empty their guano hauls into the tank. You can even plunge into the vat of filth and travel through the pipes. If the collectors are still on your back, they get drenched.

"I don't think we ever want to be too explicit about what's going on here," Haggett says. "Some people play through this stage and they say, 'Oh, it's honey!' And that's fine. They don't really even get that these are

"I don't think we ever want to be too explicit about what's going on here"

insects." Hogg chimes in: "I quite like that there's ambiguity. When we decided to effectively make [this stage] about poo, we chose a [mustard-yellow] colour that's – well, it could've been more emphatically poo."

The game's blissful vibe in part stems from its art, but also comes from its soundtrack, which morphs and builds as you interact with the level furniture. In the early stages of development, Hogg and Haggett used placeholder tracks from many of their favourite electronic artists, such as Tycho and Shigeto. One of the unexpected fruits of the developers' eventual collaboration with Sony Santa Monica came when a Sony licensing guru approached record label Ghostly International to acquire the tracks, only to discover numerous musicians on the label were so enamoured with the game that a number of them wanted to compose bespoke music for it. Who can blame them? *Hohokum* is an easy game to fall in love with. ■

The shifty-eyed insects attempting to clean up the guano from their nest grow tired after a day's work





Test chamber

Because *Hohokum* offers so little explicit guidance, there's pressure to ensure the design communicates well. "It's definitely a game that needs a ton of playtesting," Haggett explains, "because what we think is obvious just isn't obvious, and some things that we think people will never figure out, they just end up doing straight away." One benefit of partnering with Sony is that guinea pigs are in abundant supply. Haggett and another programmer regularly visit Sony's London office, whose Intranet can advertise playtests company-wide. "We'll go down and watch some random person from the accounts department… just random people who say, 'Yeah, I'll come do a playtest.' We take loads of notes."





SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** EAD Tokyo **Format** Wii U **Origin** Japan **Release** November 21 (JP), 22 (NA), 29 (EU)



An E3 showing did little to dispel the notion that ***Super Mario 3D World*** was a hasty up-res of ***3D Land***, but it is now starting to show its true colours. This is as vibrant as any 3D ***Mario***, but Wii U has processing power enough to match EAD Tokyo's restless invention. Burnt-orange sunsets catch the eye, but what captures the imagination is the gentle subversion of series staples. Cat Mario claws away Bullet Bills and scrambles up end-of-level flagpoles. The plumber passes unnoticed through a group of enemies by wearing a Goomba hat. And you can run and jump where you please through a ***NSMB***-style world map.

DEUS EX UNIVERSE

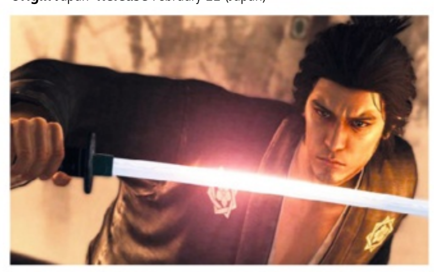
Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Eidos Montreal **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Canada **Release** TBC



With Eidos Montreal one of the handful of Square Enix studios to escape a rap over the knuckles in full view of shareholders for missing sales targets, the publisher is betting big on the ***Deus Ex*** brand. ***Universe*** isn't a game so much as a cross-media, well, universe, spanning not only PC and next-gen consoles but smartphones, tablets, books and graphic novels, too. It begins with a game, though, which Montreal has confirmed is already in development.

YAKUZA ISHIN

Publisher Sega **Developer** Yakuza Studio **Format** PS3, PS4, Vita **Origin** Japan **Release** February 22 (Japan)



After ***Yakuza 5***, Toshihiro Nagoshi's next historical spin-off takes a trip to Meiji Restoration-era Japan. ***Ishin*** will be released alongside PS4 in Japan, with PS3 and PS Vita cross-play versions also planned. Series fans take heart: Nagoshi isn't ruling out a Western release for ***Ishin***.

CRIMSON DRAGON

Publisher Microsoft Studios **Developer** Grounding, Inc **Format** Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** November 22



The spiritual successor to ***Panzer Dragoon*** takes flight at last. It's free-flight boss stages are hard to control – the right stick moves your reticle as well as the camera, making it tricky to circle and attack the gargantuan bosses. Still, the game's art direction and RPG-like dragon-breeding elements look great.

STRIDER

Publisher Capcom **Developer** Double Helix **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2014



Quite how Double Helix became the industry's rebooter-in-chief remains a mystery, but the California studio is now working not only on the new ***Killer Instinct*** but the return of Strider Hiryu, too. It certainly looks the part, and a TGS hands-on was broadly positive, though enemy AI is a concern.

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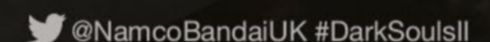
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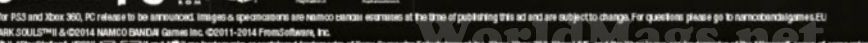
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FACE OFF

Sony and Microsoft's next-gen consoles are just weeks away from making landfall. We go hands-on with the hardware and assess their every facet in order to shape our final verdicts, then speak to execs at two of the world's biggest publishers to find out how they're tackling the generational transition





Controller

Force feedback or touch: who's bringing the next-gen revolution?

More than any other feature, a console's controller shapes your gut-level opinion of the quality of the hardware sitting beneath your television. On this front, Xbox One's new pad makes a prestigious first impression. The bulbous contours of the 360 controller opted for sleekness at the expense of a chiselled physique. The new pad's revised top-down silhouette incorporates a few sharper angles, noticeably in the crescent arcing between the pad's handles. It's more handsome as a result.

The analogue sticks have been drastically improved. The slightly narrower diameter of the dish atop each stick provides a greater sense of precision, since your thumb no longer gets mired in the depression. Microsoft's designers have wrapped a ring of tread around the perimeter of each stick that has no chance of wearing smooth like the dimples on the 360 controller's sticks.

Adding localised rumble in the triggers – which have had their travel reduced for heightened responsiveness – increases drama while playing. Turning your key in the ignition in *Forza 5* and feeling the sensory feedback erupt in your fingertip before spreading to the body of controller feels like a step forward in tactile communication.

However, the choice to elevate the bedding of the shoulder buttons, which used to sit naturally under your fingers at their resting position, feels ill-advised. It's a new sensation to feel the tendon between your index and middle finger grumble each time you ask it to stretch for RB or LB. And the choice to offload touch functionality onto SmartGlass-enabled devices creates the first real functional discrepancy between Microsoft and Sony's offerings. With the ascendancy of touchscreen gaming, it's a minor liability for Xbox One, but a liability nonetheless.

Having grown so familiar with the PlayStation controller's proportions over 16 years, DualShock 4 comes as a surprise. Though it clearly belongs to the same dynasty as its 1997 forebear, this is the most radical iteration from those early design foundations yet.

For a start, DualShock 4 has shaken off its progenitors' undernourished look. Its shoulder buttons and triggers, which are slightly concave and extremely responsive, now sit almost flush with the top of the pad, while the analogue stick bays protrude less. There is a greater sense of continuity, too, since the ergonomic design dispenses with the segmentation of previous DualShocks in favour of one flowing shell, with the D-pad and face buttons sitting on much smaller plateaus than on PS3's controller.

The result is a tidier-looking pad, the effect helped by the large touchpad in the centre that doubles as a Start button. While the placement of the Share and Options buttons that flank it feels like an afterthought, they're easy enough to reach. The touchpad is a less comfortable stretch and lacks the heft of the other main buttons. Sitting just underneath it is a speaker.

The D-pad, meanwhile, with its raised profile and angled indentations, feels significantly better than those on past DualShocks, even if Xbox One's cross design allows for finer control. But it's the analogue sticks that are most transformed. Sony has stuck with in-line placement, but the sticks are more comfortably positioned thanks to longer grips, eradicating that slight tension you feel in your left thumb when resting on them. There's very little deadzone, too, and DualShock 3's slippery convex tops have been replaced with a concave design with raised trim. At last PS4 has a pad that can compete with its Xbox counterpart.

Microsoft adds 40 upgrades to its near-perfect 360 controller design and retains the title belt for another round

PS4's light strip adds a dash of colour to its sleek black form, while Xbox One is monochrome

Hardware

Dissecting two schools of chassis design, and motion-sensing add-ons

While it may be hard to believe at first glance, Microsoft's new console is an exercise in subtlety. It's a substantial slab of plastic, at least in relation to Sony's design, and there are similarities to be drawn between the two – the use of contrasting matte and gloss blacks, for example, or those austere facades and perpendicular dividing lines – but Xbox One's flourishes are all but invisible until you get up close. In fact, when it's nestled alongside your set-top box, a casual observer might not notice it at all. And that's the whole point, indicative of Microsoft's campaign to truly take control of the living room with this painstakingly inoffensive Trojan horse.

Microsoft's box might lack personality, but it more than makes up for it in terms of build quality. It's heavier than an Xbox 360 Slim, but lighter than an Elite, and feels built to last. The slot-loading Blu-ray drive sits in a silver bezel just next to the pad-pairing button on the side of the console. To the right of the drive when the console is laid flat, as Microsoft recommends, a white Xbox logo doubles as a touch-sensitive power button, lighting up when the console is on. Kinect 2.0 is deeper and stubbier than the original, and sports a large rear-facing fan. Despite being packed in, though, Microsoft has finally admitted that motion control isn't a blanket next-gen solution and, with any luck, won't lean on developers to shoehorn in functionality.

Irrespective of whether or not the prospect of another *Killzone* instalment excites you, this is exactly how a next-gen console should look. PlayStation 4 has the air of a recovered alien artefact, its inscrutable surfaces bereft of any colour – even the Sony and PS4 logos are black, the latter ditching the Spider-Man font. But the blanket obsidian is broken up when you switch it on and that bisecting strip of light pulses from purple to blue. The design is set off by the console's steep rhombus profile, and the back, where various ports sit in angled, segmented bays among the system's vents. The overall effect is reminiscent of a Michael Blampied car park.

The machine feels less robust than Xbox One, its plastic top flexing under pressure. But if you're in the habit of moving your console between different houses, its smaller dimensions and reduced weight will be a boon. Similarly, PS4's touch-sensitive power button is less satisfying to use than Xbox One's, sitting in an awkward recess next to the Blu-ray drive. That's not much of an issue, though – both consoles will likely be powered on via controllers most of the time. While Kinect 2.0's chunky design alludes to its power, the slimmer PlayStation Eye appears decidedly lower tech, but as input devices the pair are broadly similar, and Eye's performance is significantly improved when used in conjunction with the controller's light bar.

While Xbox One attempts to blend in with your other consumer electronics, PS4's design exudes real charisma



Launch window exclusives

Which console has the best opening barrage?





If we trained a Kinect 2.0 sensor on you and uttered the phrase "launch title", it's doubtful the biometric tool would pick up any discernible leap in heart rate or retina dilation. It takes a while for developers to get to grips with new hardware and the opening salvo of releases – including *Forza Motorsport 5* for Xbox One's launch – only hints at each console's true potential. Expectations are low, and justifiably so given the clear precedent set by console launches of the past

Diminishing returns in visual fidelity were inevitable, but it's hard to not feel deflated given how dramatic generational leaps once felt. The most next-gen thing we noticed in our demo of *Forza 5* was the fact that switching between paint finish options in the pre-race showroom sees each preview update instantly, without the customary loading hesitation of current-gen games. But the pixel is still alive and well in the Xbox One launch lineup. Get out on the track and you might even mistake *Forza 5* for a 360 title: it's undeniably handsome, but with occasional texture pop-in on the track and low-resolution textures on parts of the car's dash.

Killer Instinct makes up for its flat skyboxes with a host of impressive particle effects: explosions of sparks, crackling lightning, and moves accompanied by bright flashes. The next generation promises to be filled with such things, and the now-ubiquitous vision of a flock of birds abruptly taking wing is destined to spawn its own drinking game. *Killer Instinct's* microtransactions are probably its biggest next-gen signifier. The impact of the free-to-play business model's success on mobile will hit consoles with the force of a meteor strike, and like the dinosaurs, many gaming conventions of years past are liable to slump to the ground as the dust chokes them.

In *Ryse: Son Of Rome*'s Colosseum multiplayer mode, the foliage and level furniture that emerges from the floor of the arena via enigmatic machinery looks amazing, but the gameplay gets a downward thumb. Combat feels sludgy and unresponsive. And in a post-300 world, who makes a gladiator game with pits and doesn't give you an option to kick enemies into them in slow motion? Microsoft seems keenly aware that it just needs to tide people over until *Titanfall* arrives early next year. The day it drops, however, Xbox One claims an advantage.

With Sony having historically put a greater emphasis on specs, you'd expect its firstparty studios to relish in establishing next-gen production value benchmarks. Launch title *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is a visual triumph, mixing shimmering futuristic cityscapes with a woodland whose tree trunks and branches cast god beams beautiful enough to make a grown space marine weep. Still, the most enticing application of PS4's processing muscle comes in the form of spacious, nonlinear environments. Players will be invited to tackle objectives in the order of their choosing, as opposed to being funnelled through a shooting gallery.

Evolution Studios' arcade racer *Driveclub* will speed off the launch-day starting line with its focus on asynchronous friend rivalries in addition to the standard finish-line quest. Every corner has the potential to spawn more competition, since the game measures drift length, cornering time and numerous other metrics with which to goad your friends. These aren't brand-new ideas – the debut of Autolog functionality *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* kept racing fans coming back to reclaim bragging rights – but Sony is delivering on the next-gen emphasis on social interaction. And creating granular challenges within each track relieves some of the pressure of always having to gun for a first-place finish.

Based on our glimpses of the game, *Knack* has the potential to be the weakest of either console's launch roster. It features ageing thirdperson brawling mechanics, collectible hunts set in overly sparse environments and a cartoon hero who's about as lovable and distinct as a pile of scrap metal. Preloaded title *The PlayRoom* also occupies the family-friendly niche, but feels like an endearing tech demo more than anything, perhaps even an enticement to splash out on a PlayStation Eye.

Killzone: Shadow Fall is perhaps the best looking of the launch titles, reportedly using up to 800MB of RAM just for post-processing effects



A proven racing franchise in Forza 5 *and exclusivity on* Titanfall. *Advantage Microsoft*

Indie support

Who's offering the best opportunities to independent developers?

Sony might have the lead when it comes to indies, but Microsoft is working hard to woo smaller studios, too. An unpopular policy that required independent studios to work with a publisher was scrapped in July, the company unveiling its Independent Developers @ Xbox programme shortly thereafter, along with the news that retail Xbox Ones will eventually also serve as dev kits.

For now, though, registered ID@Xbox developers will receive two Xbox One dev kits for free and unrestricted access to the console, Kinect 2.0, Live and SmartGlass. Microsoft's approach remains more cautious than Sony's, however, and it will be favouring studios with a "proven track record of shipping games on console, PC, mobile or tablet" for the initial stages of its programme.

A global support team will be available to registered devs, with Microsoft aiming to provide rapid responses to submissions via community managers, as well as maintaining developer relations. In the longer term, any Xbox owner will be in a position to self-publish once the switch is flipped on the hardware's dev kit functionality.

While Microsoft has come under fire for a series of policy reversals, it should be applauded for listening to the needs of both players and developers. It still has some way to go in winning back the trust of developers burned by their experience of publishing through Xbox Live, but on paper it appears the company is serious about making amends.

Console manufacturers backing indie developers might be akin to a bank advert soundtracked by whimsical folk music, but Sony and Microsoft are both well aware of the goodwill such support engenders. While both companies have reached out to independent developers, it's Sony that has chosen to prioritise smaller titles for launch. In fact, it has gone so far as to give its slate of indie games equal prominence to their big-budget counterparts.

Sony has already attracted a great many studios with its no-fuss self-publishing policies, which minimise the amount of red tape developers have to cut through, promising a streamlined, single-stage submission process with a one-week turnaround. The likes of Vlambeer, Honeyslug and Housemarque, among many others, are already on board, and singing the praises of Sony's approach. The company is happy to provide dev kits to any studio with a striking idea, not just those with experience, and offers financial, technological, business and even creative support.

Quarterly indie events at Sony's London offices will create the opportunity for an even closer dialogue between the company and small devs from around the world, and Sony offers optional free feedback during the development process to help studios hone their ideas. The combination of a detailed plan and the vocal appreciation of the developers already working with it make it clear that Sony's indie push is more than just a marketing exercise.

Sony is clearly out ahead when it comes to indies, and it's telling how much weight that has carried in players' minds

Firstparty studios

The platform-exclusive teams making the system sellers of tomorrow

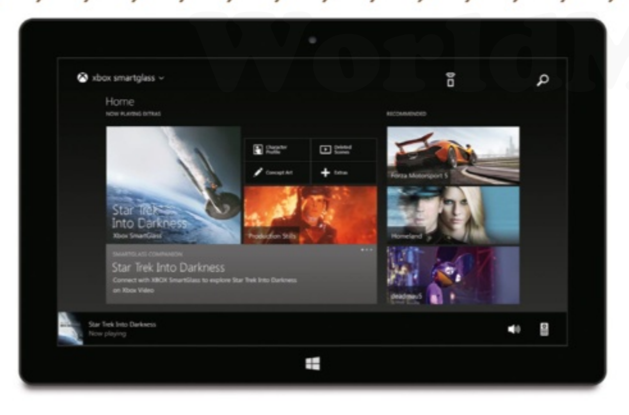


The network of firstparty studios owned by a given company ought to be a key factor in gauging the attractiveness of a console. The fact that Microsoft has the *Halo* property might be more important than the fact that it has 343 Industries, but the studio proved its technological mettle with *Halo 4* and millions of players will be damned if they're going to be on the sideline when *Halo 5* makes its debut. Turn 10 Studios has stolen the firstparty racing mantle from Polyphony and will be dressed to impress with *Forza 5*. Lionhead hasn't made a great game since *Fable II*, but nobody's ruling it out. Rare has a storied back catalogue, but again hasn't made a standout hit in years. Black Tusk Studios in Vancouver has the potential to step up as a major player, but the stealth-action game it's working on is still just 30 seconds of footage in the minds of the gaming public.

Sony has a deep bench when it comes to firstparty studio talent. Considering the graphical performance Naughty Dog managed to squeeze out of PlayStation 3, it's hard to imagine what it could do with next-gen hardware. Sony also has Team Ico, which will surely break its silence on *The Last Guardian* shortly. *LittleBigPlanet* dev Media Molecule is expected to work magic with the social features enabled by PS4. Guerrilla Games' *Killzone* franchise has delivered some of the most visually remarkable shooters on the market. Sony Santa Monica is nurturing Victorian-era shooter *The Order: 1886*, as well as helping Honeyslug forge *Hohokum*, a hugely promising indie title. The company has made it clear that PS4's hardware was built in close collaboration with its worldwide studios, so it promises to be even better suited to their specific game-making needs.

Microsoft has weighty series, but the combination of Naughty Dog, Media Molecule and Team Ico wins out







Vita will be able to stream PS4 games via PS Vita TV, as Shuhei Yoshida demonstrated at TGS 2013

Second-screen experiences

Tablets and companion handhelds will dissolve gameplay boundaries

Employing two screens in its DS handheld made Nintendo look like the smartest guy in the room for a while, but its embattled Wii U has shown that separating the interaction between a handheld tablet and television is a tougher sell. Microsoft has touted its SmartGlass app as the company's second-screen solution, but a solution to what? DICE demonstrated one of the better-looking applications of the technology, which involves players sending in airstrikes in *Battlefield 4* via tablet – perhaps even from their local coffee shop – but however nice the concept is in theory, it's hard to find such interactions enticing on a practical level. Microsoft lacks a handheld companion console in the vein of Sony's Vita, which means it loses a slate of input functionality and must rely solely on touch interactions. This undermines the short-term possibility of remote play and paves the way for the already-tired Wii U paradigm of second-screen inventory management.

Vita may have hobbled out of the gate in terms of sales, but the arrival of PlayStation 4 promises to greatly enhance its prospects. The arrival of PS4-Vita bundles is only a matter of time, and Sony has been working to make sure players come to view the pair as console-mates. The announcement of PS Vita TV at Tokyo Game Show 2013 further strengthens the bond between Vita and PS4, giving players the ability to play PS4 games remotely in the event that a partner, child or housemate hijacks the living-room television. The ability to play cooperatively is already on PS3, allowing a second player to join a round of *Spelunky* using Vita to control their character. Rounding it all off, the PlayStation app will arrive later this year, allowing players to purchase games and manage their profiles via tablet, and even indulge in the sort of ancillary gameplay interactions that have already been showcased for Microsoft's SmartGlass app.

Having both Vita and tablets in play makes Sony's second-screen pitch the more immediately persuasive

Social services

Which console is friendliest to your friends list?

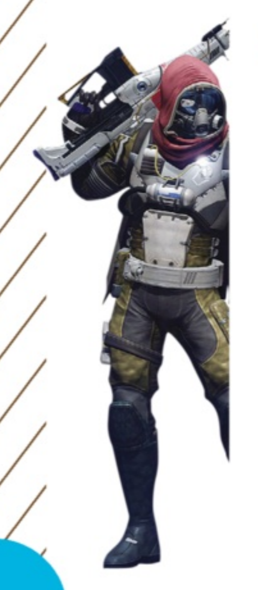
Xbox Live set the template for online console gaming and distribution, and if Microsoft can rectify its sticky visibility issues, there's no reason it can't take the lead again. Existing Live Gold accounts will carry over, along with your Gamerscore, achievements and any non-game content such as films that you've purchased on 360 (as with PS4, there is no backwards compatibility), and your account will work across both machines. Better still, multiple accounts will be able to use a single subscription, a vast improvement over the current Gamertag-specific system. Microsoft will also continue its Games With Gold programme, which offers two free games per month. You'll be able to broadcast through Twitch.tv as well as edit and upload up to five minutes of footage using Xbox One's in-built Upload Studio, which should increase the volume of Let's Plays tenfold.

Sony's strategy in using PlayStation Plus's enticing instant game library to bridge its once-free online services with a revenue-generating model in the vein of Xbox Live Gold was a savvy play. If you already have PlayStation Plus membership, it will extend to the PS4 as well, giving you access to online multiplayer, cloud storage and roaming profiles. You'll also get the Instant Game Collection, with a new title added each month, the first addition to which will be Housemarque's *Super Stardust* successor, *Resogun*. A slightly stripped-down *Driveclub* will also be available to all PS Plus members at launch, with other free-to-play titles to follow (Capcom's *Deep Down* is expected next year). And Sony's partnership with Twitch.tv will allow players to spectate as well as share their own videos and screenshots with a quick tap of the Share button.

There's little to choose between them, but Microsoft is building its service on more stable foundations

Cloud technology

How Sony and Microsoft intend to deepen the next-gen online experience



Azure, Microsoft's robust cloud infrastructure, represents a significant asset in delivering on the company's next-gen gaming ambitions. With richer social interactions, digital delivery, background updates, persistent worlds in the vein of Bungie's *Destiny*, and innate streaming functionality being such central parts of its gaming future, the stress applied by those areas functioning at scale will be immense. Such massive demands require equally immense server architecture. Xbox One offers developers the option of offloading computational tasks to the cloud, but it remains unclear what this means for those forced to play offline. The company is also working feverishly to counter Sony's Gaikai advantage. Recent reports claim Microsoft has internally demoed *Halo 4* streaming to a Windows Phone and low-spec PC. This unnamed service is still in the prototype phase, but the promise of streaming 360 games would be an attractive selling point, especially for a console with no in-built backwards compatibility options.

Sony's acquisition of cloud-based game streaming service Gaikai signalled that exciting developments were in store for its next-gen console. Even though the comprehensive vision detailed at PlayStation 4's reveal won't come into effect in concert with the hardware's launch, if the company makes good on the majority of its promises, Sony's console will have a decisive advantage over its Redmond-based rival. Purchase a game digitally and you'll be able to begin to play it while the rest of the package downloads. You needn't miss out on classics when you can stream legacy PlayStation titles with cloud-enabled backwards compatibility. Also promised is instant access to demos without the tedious wait for progress bars to make their plodding march across the screen, and remote streaming of PS4 games to Vita. DualShock 4's Share button will be intimately tied to a wide array of cloud functionality, including streaming and screen sharing as well as uploading screenshots and gameplay videos to social media.



Sony's vision for Gaikai feels like the most tangible roadmap either company has yet delivered

Media and services

What entertainment is available while you're not playing games?



While Kinect 2.0's voice recognition abilities are integral to the console's media box ambitions, its cameras could have darker uses

Microsoft attracted flak when it chose to focus on non-gaming features for Xbox One's debut. It has since somewhat redressed the balance, but still wants Xbox One to the absolute centre of your living room. Chief among its strategies is the ability to integrate your TV by plugging a set-top box into the console's HDMI in port. This, along with Skype, streaming services such as HBO, ESPN and Netflix, and a Blu-ray drive are all controllable through Kinect's improved voice recognition and Xbox One's clean UI. But Microsoft also has big plans for advertising, though it has denied reports that it is thinking about the ways in which it can offer Kinect-gathered biometric data to advertisers looking to increase and hone their reach. Netflix is waiting for a "societal evolution" on privacy before it looks into this potentially shady area, but exactly how long will it be until users are comfortable with this type of surveillance?

While PS4 owners will require a PS Plus subscription for online play, very little else will be behind a paywall. Unlike Xbox One – which requires a Live Subscription for any online activity, plus game recording and sharing – streaming services such as Hulu, LoveFilm and Netflix, and party chat will be available to all PS4 owners. Sony's redesigned XMB interface is less cluttered, though it still doesn't feel as intuitive as Xbox One's UI. One nice touch, however, is the ability to switch to motion control when typing by clicking the right stick. It's a surprisingly intuitive alternative to navigating by D-pad. Sony has also redesigned its Music Unlimited service, offering users a global library of over 22 million songs that can be browsed and listened to without having to leave your game. PS4 may have a reduced offering when it comes to media content, but what it does have will be open to all and additive to its primary focus: games.

If you want a multimedia box and don't mind Kinect's insidious side, Xbox One is the clear winner

Ease of development

What is it really like to create eighth-generation games?

Policies, not hardware, will dictate the ease of development on Xbox One and PlayStation 4, and Microsoft's policies were an off-the-record joke for the developers we met at E3 and Gamescom. Some of those policies changed or were clarified, but others seem a mystery even to Microsoft itself. Will Xbox One allow crossplatform play between PC and Xbox? Nobody knows. How will free-to-play games work on the console? That's undecided beyond a few specific instances. Will developers be allowed to manage their own patching schedule – essential for running an up-to-the-minute crossplatform game – free from Microsoft's lengthy certification checks? Again, nobody knows.

Get past the policies and, bar some complaints about drivers, Xbox One is no trickier to work with than 360. Like PlayStation 4, Xbox One mimics the architecture of a PC. But Microsoft's 360 expertise has also been thrown at a console built for broader uses than Sony's PC-in-a-box. The embedded memory is a throwback to 360 that offers Xbox One an edge in some operations, but would also make the console a marginally trickier development proposition had so many developers not spent so many years making 360 games. Snap Apps run in a Windows 8 environment, which again makes Xbox One a familiar place to bring software, and since switching is handled on the operating system side, developers don't have to worry about implementing a form of Ctrl+Alt+Del support for a console.

Eight years of western dominance has given Microsoft a head start, but that same dominance has made it complacent. What worked in 2005 won't work in 2013, where games like *Minecraft* and *League Of Legends* thrive because they can rapidly evolve. If PS4's *Minecraft* can be patched alongside the PC version while 4J's Xbox port lags months behind, what then? If *Titanfall*'s first patch hits PC three weeks before Xbox One, Microsoft's flagship exclusive will be compromised. It isn't beyond Microsoft's ability to adapt its policies to reflect the changing environment, but for now Xbox One feels like a console built for 2020 on policies designed a decade ago.

Sadly, Xbox One developers may well be hampered by Microsoft's ongoing policy confusions



Titanfall **is a key draw for Xbox One, but it's also seeing release on PC and 360**

Lessons were learned. After eight years of memory management issues and Cell-related woe, PlayStation developers can look forward to a console more powerful on paper than Xbox One yet no more complicated than Microsoft's own mini-PC. That extra overhead will give them greater room for manoeuvre when porting crossplatform games and more options when developing for PlayStation alone, but the consoles' similarities are so numerous, developers' only frustration is needing to port games at all.

"There's no real difference between them," *Resident Evil* creator **Shinji Mikami** says. "We only need one console. Why do I have to make two versions of a game? And when Xbox One was first announced it had lower specs than PS4, but now they're almost identical. So either will do."

"I don't think there's a major difference between them," Comcept's **Keiji Inafune** agrees. "If you get down to the tiny details then maybe each is better at one thing than the other, but it doesn't really impact the way you make a game. It's not like PS4 or Xbox One are particularly hard to develop for. Quite the opposite: you can make whatever you want on either one, and that should be enough for anyone."

So the difference will be made in policy and support, and on that front Sony has stolen a daunting lead over its competitor, allowing developers permission to patch their games as and when needed, opening servers to match PS4 players against PC players if required, and actively pursuing and supporting indie developers. While Microsoft was busy buying *Titanfall* and *Dead Rising 3*, Sony was funding a hundred indie projects, including *Metrico*, *Hohokum* and Mike Bithell's *Volume*. Microsoft will give developers two Xbox Ones just to get started, but Sony has been actively chasing independents for two years now and offering technical and financial support when needed.

Whether a hundred arthouse games will sell a console better than a single *Titanfall* is doubtful, but there's no denying which format is friendlier for the most developers so long as Sony is so firmly in the indies' corner.



PS4 retains a performance advantage on paper, which makes it slightly more flexible



Resident Evil **creator Shinji Mikami would prefer just one new console, since the specs of PS4 and Xbox One are so closely aligned**

Both offer a friendly environment, but only Sony has the policies to really encourage experimentation



Q&A: Frank Gibeau

President, EA Labels

How do you steer a traditional publishing juggernaut into a new era of gaming? That's the question we put to high-ranking EA exec **Frank Gibeau** on the cusp of Xbox One and PS4's release. He explains what the organisation behind *Battlefield*, *FIFA* and the forthcoming *Titanfall* makes of the console war, the next-gen evolution of online games and the slow march toward an all-digital future.



What has EA learned from previous hardware transitions that will help you at the start of this new generation?

In the 2000 timeframe, we didn't do a good job of managing it – you may remember the situation with RenderWare? That was kind of EA's Vietnam. We saw that mistake and we definitely applied ourselves this time around to getting early investment in technology and to moving our best and brightest engineers over to really build that out. We got that nailed and then we started to build the games on top of it.

Our goal was to look at this transition as an opportunity to grow the business overall, to grow our share, introduce some new intellectual properties and position ourselves really well for day one. So we have six titles planned for the new consoles coming up to this Christmas, then we have a fairly extensive SKU plan for 2015, 2016 and beyond to take us to a place where we can grow the console business cycle over cycle. We're really excited by it; we believe in the systems. They are, depending on how you measure it, between six and ten times more powerful than current-gen consoles. They're going to come out of the box with strong online capabilities, as opposed to in the last cycle, where it happened mid-point. So we think there are a lot of advantages, a lot of new capabilities that are really going to light up the market.

What do you need to get out of this console war?

What's important to EA is that this is a multipolar world – that there are competing platforms and that both are experiencing some degree of success. We don't [want] a monopolar world where one platform is dominant. I think that harms the overall health of the business and isn't in our interest. So the fact that PS4 and Xbox One have had a combative summer is good. I think the Sony team has executed exceptionally well – and they did not execute particularly well on PS3, whereas last time around Microsoft executed perfectly. This time, Microsoft has run into some challenges, some leadership changes, but they're a very resilient organisation, and if you look at their counter punches on any setbacks, they've done a pretty good job of getting back on track.

From our perspective, we believe that both platforms will be successful. They'll definitely both have great Christmases this time around; anything [Sony and Microsoft] build is going to sell out. We're making games for both platforms, and the response to them has been pretty positive.

With the *FIFA 14* Xbox One bundle, you entered the console war in an intrinsic way. Beyond any financial motivations, what was the thinking behind that? It's been interpreted in some quarters as a tilt towards Microsoft.

We're not tilting Microsoft's way; we are firm longterm supporters of Sony. I'm sure you'll see tactical programmes between us and Sony in the future that we haven't announced, but will make things much more balanced.

***Titanfall* looks and feels great, but when you first inked the deal with Respawn there was considerable risk involved, considering the controversy over Jason West and Vince Zampella's departure from Infinity Ward. Was it always obvious to you that they'd produce something special?**

Look, this industry is talent-driven. Talented people create these experiences. It's a very specialised skill; there are only a certain number of people in the world who can do it. Those guys had a track record of repeatedly doing it, so we always had faith and confidence in them. That's frankly why we entered the relationship with them, and why I persevered through so many… trials and tribulations, I'll just call it that. But, no, we couldn't have been more pleased with the response. The expectations were high and they exceeded them. We're very pleased. But

"WE'RE NOT TILTING MICROSOFT'S WAY; WE ARE FIRM LONGTERM SUPPORTERS OF SONY"

when you enter a deal like that, you're betting on talent and you've got to stick with someone you brought to the dance!

As someone who plays games, what interests you most about where next-gen titles are going?
It's the living world concept. The horsepower that the machines provide allows us to increase character animations by an order of magnitude: they look and feel more alive, the performances will be richer, they'll be more emotional. The worlds will be larger, they'll be more dynamic; your characters will have persistence but the world will change around them. There's the idea that your characters will come to life, they'll be more engaging, and games will be massively multiplayer. *Battlefield* is going from 32 players to 64 – that's just the first wave. The sheer scale of multiplayer, both in terms of co-op and competitive, will increase the dynamism of the world. Open-world games will rule the day as opposed to the linear experiences we saw in the current gen.

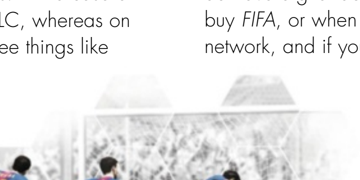
And with this idea of persistence comes the need to create new revenue models. [Perhaps] it won't be about DLC any more, but rather subscriptions or F2P mechanics. Fortunately, we've already gone down that path with *FIFA Ultimate Team*, *Battlefield Premium* and some of the things we've done with *Mass Effect*. It's not just DLC – we think of these as live services, so we give you microtransactions, free content, episodic stuff. We try lots of different models of content delivery to keep the entertainment going. It's much more title-specific than trying to slap a business model on things. In the case of *Battlefield*, it made sense to come out with DLC, whereas on *Ultimate Team* it's more card-based. As you see things like *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Plants Vs Zombies* and *Titanfall*, you'll see different models, but they're meant to keep you in the universe for a longer period of time. And if that works, then it all comes together.

PLASTIC EXPLOSION

Two of EA's major competitors, Activision and Disney, have banked on the toy/game crossover market, but is this avenue something EA would consider today? "It is a very high bar for us to get involved with," Gibeau says. "Plastic is expensive, there's a lot of risk, and it's very faddish. We were really good partners with Harmonix and Viacom on *Rock Band*, so it's not like we didn't participate in plastic. Right now, I think there *are* crossover possibilities, maybe not in console, maybe in mobile, but I'd hate to be the third in on the toy market."

What about the social side of games? You've innovated with things like Autolog and Battlelog, bringing in asynchronous multiplayer among friends, and it seems that next-gen consoles are going to push that side of things still further. How do you ensure that your games evolve accordingly?
Well, the capability is there in the systems. It comes down to how you innovate, creatively. *Need For Speed Rivals* does some interesting things where it mingles single- and multiplayer. You'll be playing singleplayer but the world around you is multiplayer and it's your choice to enter into that aspect or not. You can let in who you want. The secret of social right now is that it's more about intimate, rather than broad, groups. You'll see a lot of innovation in *Titanfall* and *Need For Speed*, and the new Battlelog is nuts in terms of the things you can do. We'll open up the funnel more in time. It's enlightened self-interest: Microsoft has released data that shows if you have a certain number of friends, you're that much more engaged. The more friends we get you to play with inside an experience, the more likely you are to stay.

If feels like EA has led the way in digital; it represented 70 per cent of your business last year. Do you think we'll leave physical games discs behind this generation?
Putting 25GB on a disc is still a really efficient way to distribute product – especially with the current broadband penetration rates – and that's especially true when you still have a large secondary goods market like used games. I think retail is going to be alive and well for some time, especially in Europe. But what you do observe from music and film is that when the bit flips and the efficiency goes the other way, it goes *fast*. I do see some exciting opportunities with this console cycle, because we do have digital downloads of the games available, so when you buy *FIFA*, or when *FIFA* becomes available, it is there on the network, and if you have a great download speed then you can get it that way. With the cloud saves and with larger hard drives, you can now keep a library longer – you don't have to erase games to get new games. A lot of the friction has been removed from the player experience in relation to downloads, but there is still friction. If that gets smoothed out during this cycle, [the end of physical discs] is conceivable, but I don't forecast it. A digital-only future is possible, not probable.





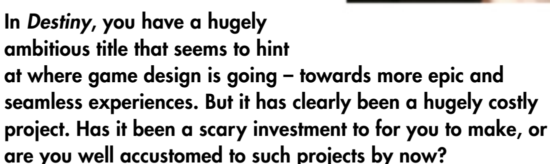
Q&A: Eric Hirshberg

CEO, Activision Publishing



While console transitions are exciting for fans, they can be terrifying and costly for game publishers. Changes in hardware specs mean many millions need to be spent on new engine technology, and as development teams grow larger and budgets expand, the transition grows ever more complex. Just ask Activision CEO **Eric Hirshberg**, the man responsible for nurturing some of the highest-profile names in games, including *Call Of Duty*, *Skylanders* and Bungie's hotly anticipated multiplayer FPS *Destiny*. It seems that having deep pockets doesn't make all-in bets any less harrowing, however.

In *Destiny*, you have a hugely ambitious title that seems to hint at where game design is going – towards more epic and seamless experiences. But it has clearly been a hugely costly project. Has it been a scary investment to for you to make, or are you well accustomed to such projects by now?
Well, certainly whenever you make a big investment there's always a level of scrutiny, care, trepidation and preparation you do to ensure it's a wise investment that's going to pay off. That said, our entire business strategy is about making big investments in a few things, then making sure they're successful by surrounding ourselves with the best development talent, by trying to choose the most compelling ideas, and then making sure we're focused and not distracted so we can market them in the most compelling way possible. If you accept that is a scary-yet-effective strategy, then it settles your nerves a little when you go into something like *Destiny*, because you have all the pieces that usually lead to success: a tremendously talented developer, a very compelling differentiated concept and then an ability to market things successfully. We focus on doing a few things well. That's been a very good strategy for us. It's not for the faint of heart, but it's very effective.



What's your impression of the next-gen console war so far?
Taking the broadest perspective, it's great how passionate everybody is. The worst possible response we could be seeing as an industry would be apathy. People are anything but apathetic! There are a lot of very strong points of view out there and we've seen them being voiced in very dramatic fashion since the console reveals, and that's ultimately good news for the industry. This is a passionate and engaged audience, and they're paying attention to the new hardware. I think, though, that the concept of the console wars exists primarily in our own echo chamber as an industry. What you really have is two different approaches from two very capable companies. Both machines are terrific, so it's gamers who will win, because they have choice. They're not carbon-copy boxes with different logos on the front.

With the increased expense of next-gen development, how do you ensure that you're still able to publish original titles?
We haven't timed our new IP launches to coincide with the next generation, they're timed to coincide with when we have great ideas. For example, in many ways, *Skylanders* is a next-gen idea. I don't mean in terms of the specific hardware, I mean the level of thinking that went into it: it's a very outside-of-the-box way to approach a game. It's not attached to hardware capabilities, it's attached to a new gameplay mechanic that's very captivating and original, which is why we invested in it.

With *Destiny*, when we first got into this relationship with Bungie there was no way of knowing that a console transition year would be happening when we revealed it. It's good luck that the style of the game is where it seems development is going in the next generation. We signed off on that vision as a current-gen game because that's what it was at the time. I feel that, when the next-generation consoles come, it's our job to utilise them to the best of our ability in order to maximise the gaming experience, but I actually think it's a misperception that because there's a next gen of hardware that's what instigates thinking about new IP. The creative process is more fluid than that.

"THE NEXT GEN IS BEING DESIGNED TO SLOT RIGHT IN TO THAT MULTIDEVICE DAISYCHAIN WE ALL HAVE"

But does game design have to change? A lot of the games we see now are still aimed at that familiar demographic: males aged between 18 and 30. Do you foresee Activision reaching beyond the comfort zone of the young adult male and kids markets and looking at other genres? The romantic comedy is among the most popular Hollywood genres, yet videogames have no equivalent. Will Activision ever make a romcom?
That's a very provocative question. However, I think there's something to do with allowing different media to do what each media does well. When I think of games as an art form, they start with being transportive. Because they're interactive, because you are more involved in the experience than in any other form of entertainment, it all starts with being transported. And obviously a natural place to want to transport people is into an experience they can't have in their everyday lives. Sometimes that's driving a fast car, sometimes that's being a professional athlete, sometimes that's being a rock star, sometimes that's being a hero or going into a fantastical future. I think this is inherently what games do best and so I'd expect that to be the basis of games for a long time to come. I don't know if romantic comedy fits that model. I think that's something that movies and TV do well. There's this strange desire to morph games into movies or have them behave more like movies; I don't share that desire. Games are wonderful as they are and do different things better than other forms of media.

But as the fidelity of visuals and inputs improve, won't we see more subtle forms of interplay and emotion in games?
Indie games are already going in that direction… It's certainly true that games are improving as a storytelling medium. I don't think it's just indie games, I think *The Last Of Us* was a great example: it had dramatic improvements in narrative and character development for the medium. But, yes, there are a tremendous number of creative indie games that I think will be compelling and successful in their own right, and also have an influence on blockbuster titles. The ecosystem of innovation usually starts at the independent level in lots of art forms.

But importantly, it seems that the old barriers between indie and mainstream are coming down…
Both of the console manufacturers are talking about how the machines are designed, in part, to support independent games; we've seen them be very successful on smartphones and tablets, which are an easy path to publishing. A lot of creativity follows suit. But I think there's a tendency to think that one renders the other obsolete, that because there's a burgeoning independent sector it means blockbusters are somehow in danger. There is a demand for both and they do different things very well.

Do you think the idea of social or multiplayer gaming will fundamentally change in the next generation?
When most people play *COD* online, it's against strangers, not friends. Can that change? This is something that I see becoming one of the hallmarks of the next generation. If you look at the things that didn't even exist when the current generation of hardware was introduced: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, smartphones, tablets… That whole suite of things we now can't get through a day without didn't exist when 360 and PS3 were launched, therefore they weren't designed to particularly work well in those ecosystems – how could they [be]? Now the next generation of consoles is being designed to slot right in to be a part of that multidevice daisychain that we all have. I think this will be the element, much more than improved graphics, that will lead to the creative new ideas in game design – the fact that there are multiple devices and much more of a social signature. It feels that, in the last generation, things like Xbox Live and PSN were originally conceived as online stores, and then they unleashed multiplayer. The creative process has a way of surprising us with the way things get used.

THE LONG GAME

When we ask Hirshberg to outline Activision's strategy for smoothing the transition between generations, he demonstrates he is well aware of the risks. "Historically, console-transition years come with some short-term bumps in the road but create new opportunities in the longterm. The way to combat that is to make sure that you are developing superlative games for the next generation that establish the gold standard with your franchises. We've done that in the current generation with *COD* and *Skylanders*, and we have every intention of doing that again in the next generation. In a strange way, the assignment remains consistent – it just ups the complexity of the process, because you're utilising new technology that's still under development while you're trying to create games for it."

So when the next-gen consoles have bedded in a little, how do you envisage that Activision games will differ to the games you publish now?
I can't answer that question too specifically without starting to reveal things that aren't ready to be revealed! But if I were to predict a trend, it would be that games are about to become equally immersive and transportive, but also connected and social. That's the zeitgeist idea of the decade, that's what we're all participating in: connecting with other human beings via digital portals in very rich ways. Games are one of the first things people did together in a digital space, but while *COD* is very connected and very compelling, it's not very social. Compared to the other things that we all do together now – whether it's communicating on social networks or commenting on content, or sharing content or forwarding links to each other – games have a long way to go to be truly social. ■


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THE 20 BEST GAMES OF OUR LIFETIME

We asked you to vote for the greatest titles to have emerged since the first issue of **Edge** was published in 1993. Here are the results, along with some of the testimonies that supported your selections

20

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Original format PC **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Blizzard **Release** 2004



Love it or hate it, its success and mass appeal in its prime were undeniable, proving that it's not always the best graphics that draw the most players.
Luke Johnson

I played this game for five years, four nights a week; I was there from the very start. It's hard to explain the feeling you get completing 40-man raids, acquiring the best loot and making great friends along the way.
Darren McCoy

The phrase 'Hell is other people' has rarely been more appropriate, but I didn't play *WOW* every weekday just to collect 20 boar hearts among 50 leaping, waving naked purple elves. I played it for the joyous feeling of exploration – fighting my way to the top of a mountain, seeing a new land of fresh monsters and challenges, and knowing that the moment was unscripted. I played for these moments and for the camaraderie of my fellow Rogues.
Niki Hearns

19

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

Original format N64 **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Release** 2000



I always experience difficulty when trying to choose between this and *Ocarina Of Time*. But this was one of the most complex games ever designed, and with modern triple-A game designers assuming we're stupid (even the recent *Zelda* games have required little brain work), I am beginning to think we will never experience another work like it. The story was beautifully melancholy, and nearly every character had a part to play in a larger puzzle. Although the dungeons were few, they were, in my opinion, the most devious and well designed in *Zelda* history.
Con Lafferty

It's the most courageous and obscure episode of the series: no longer the tale of a boy who turns out to be a hero, but instead the story of a hero who turns out to be a ordinary boy in the midst of ordinary people and their stories full of regret.
Matteo Vog

For me, the unusual approach works perfectly.
Andreas Meissner

18

GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY

Original format PS2 **Publisher** Rockstar **Developer** In-house **Release** 2002



If games were awarded a review score according to how cool they are, this would be top of the list.
Kostas Promponas

While *GTAIII* was the jaw dropper, it was this follow-up that gave us the most memorable moments of emergent gameplay. By embodying the feel of an era and adopting cinematic and musical references, Rockstar tapped into a fantasy we all wanted to act out. A remarkably focused piece of sandbox design.
Daniel Howie

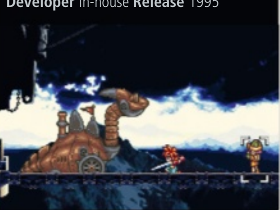
I've probably spent a third of my entire gaming life playing *GTA* games. I got *Vice City* on iPad just for its amazing soundtrack.
Major Mike Warren

GTAIII was the revolution, but the series' evolution into an '80s-inspired romp around Scarface's backyard brought with it helicopters, RC planes, motorbikes and some truly stylish Hawaiian shirts. That soundtrack alone would be enough to put *Vice City* in my top five games of all time.
Michael Dickinson

17

CHRONO TRIGGER

Format SNES **Publisher** Square **Developer** In-house **Release** 1995



The perfect balance of deep storytelling with an RPG system that didn't punish you for not knowing the genre.
Geraldo Fi Gueras

My grandmother bought this for me. The illustrations drew me in, but it's the music that would cement my unending love for the game. I even recorded the various themes on tape and listened to my self-made soundtrack on headphones everywhere I went.
Pat Connor

Every day I sigh with despair that the iOS port of this was so poorly handled, as it is without a doubt the finest RPG I played on the SNES, and the console wasn't short on quality in the genre.
Mike Diver

A JRPG that capitalises on fun in both gameplay and storyline terms; they just don't make them like this any more.
Kormákur Garðarsson

16

PORTAL

Original format PC **Publisher** Valve **Developer** In-house **Release** 2007



Did you know that *Portal* and its sequel are funnier than just about any game that doesn't have 'monkey' in the title? It's true!
Nicolas Rollins

More meta than Kojima!
Gerard Sinfreu

A masterpiece of game design.
Lee Swain

In the game, portals connect different places. Back in reality, *Portal* connects different genres and values: the most bizarre puzzle game with FPS, cerebral abstraction with the physical action.
Matteo Vog

Portal feels like it does exactly what it intends – technology mastered, allowing design and artistry to come to the fore. The sequel expands and broadens the palette, but can't recreate the impact of the original.
James Konik

It's difficult to think of any way in which this could be improved. Everything is just so perfectly judged and the fact that it boasts one of the finest scripts in videogaming is the cherry on the cake.
Jason Scott

15

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Original format 360, PS3 **Publisher** Rockstar **Developer** In-house **Release** 2010



Rockstar's foray into the Wild West was a refreshing change of scene at a time when modern shooters and space marines were running riot. The ride into new territory with Far Away by José González playing in the background was as pure a cinematic experience as there will ever be in games, and the dusty wilds of turn-of-the-century America perhaps proved to be an even better fit for an open-world game than *Grand Theft Auto*'s more modern settings.
Michael Dickinson

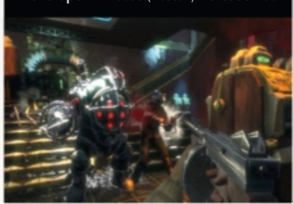
I really tried my best to give John Marston the redemption he yearned for, but my post-game stats still read 1,798 people killed.
Samuel Lockhart

Wonderfully scripted and respectful of Western archetypes, the thrill of *Red Dead Redemption* was its sumptuous recreation of an idealised environment populated with nature as red in tooth and claw as any bandito.
Andy Merrington

14

BIOSHOCK

Original format 360, PC **Publisher** 2K **Developer** In-house (Boston) **Release** 2007



A rare example of a game that provokes thought on a level beyond the purely mechanical. Rapture stays with you like no other game world.
Kevin KcKeown

A true masterpiece and force of nature. From the moment you're plunged into Rapture's creepy, compelling world, you will never want to turn back. "Would you kindly?" and the epic twist in the story makes this game a true classic and one everybody should play.
Alyssa White

It made me perceive games as a medium in a whole new way. No prior title was so deceitful, honest, bold and revelatory all at the same time.
Kamil Bazydlo

An Art Deco-filled atmospheric masterpiece. Rapture can claim to be one of the most immersive worlds ever created.
Luke Boxall

Andrew Ryan asked me kindly to put this in.
Kunal Saujani

13

ICO

Original format PS2 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Team Ico **Release** 2001



It asks you to hold Yorda's hand, but the game doesn't mollycoddle players. No invisible walls, no hints, minimal screen pans and dialogue. It's still powerful now.
Monish Khemani

Hands down my favourite videogame of all time. A simple, engaging fairytale told elegantly.
Mark Neugodov

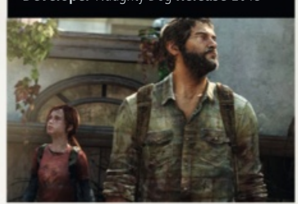
A haunting, meditative work that succeeds like no other in depicting the slow, elusive growth of friendship.
Daniel Howie

Loved the game, the puzzles, the art, the mood and the breathtaking size of the castle. The bit that will always stand out for me, though, is at the end, when I thought I'd failed to save Yorda only to find she had escaped and washed up on the beach too. It rammed home the fact that, without realising it, the designers had really made me care about these two characters.
Tom Adams

12

THE LAST OF US

Original format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog **Release** 2013



Naughty Dog found a way to make all the unintentionally awkward combat mechanics of *Uncharted* finally work to its advantage in the most beautiful game of its generation. If Roger Ebert were alive, even he might recognise this game as art.
Christopher Wardell

I don't think anyone expected it to be this good. Incredible characters (I want more of Bill's story), great gameplay and the best-delivered narrative ever in a videogame.
Chris Bourne

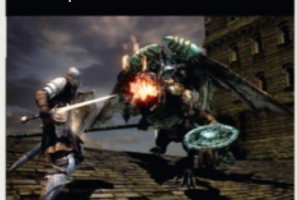
What *BioShock* pioneered, Naughty Dog took to its zenith. Raw combat, heart-aching emotional tug, and a silencing climax. Its balance of tension and release is masterful, like a perfectly paced novel.
Mike Diver

The Last Of Us features some of the most involving character and story work I've experienced in a game. This was a world and story I totally bought into, and as a result it delivered an amazing experience that'll stick with me for years.
Ben Braine

11

DARK SOULS

Original format 360, PS3 **Publisher** From **Developer** In-house **Release** 2011



I have never felt more scared about my character's life in a game. Every encounter, every corner, every trap, every pit, or even supposedly safe ground could be your grave. All with the constant threat of the ingenious online invasions.
Argiris Christoforou

I finished it after 120 hours and can't describe the elation. I felt I'd regained my own 'hardcore' image after years of essentially running through games like *Fable*.
Steven Jay Doherty

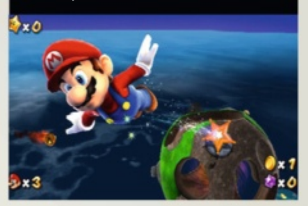
A game of such exultant highs and such soul-crushing lows.
Kormákur Garðarsson

An unapologetic celebration of the art and craft of videogames. Plays like the most cohesive and exhaustive literalisation of the challenge and mystery dormant in the code of every game since the medium's infancy.
Benjamin Pulo

10

SUPER MARIO GALAXY

Original format Wii **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Release** 2007



The best expression of the effect *Super Mario Galaxy* had on players is the recent reveal of *Super Mario 3D World*: we were given a fully cooperative *Mario* game, with wonderfully vibrant visuals and a logical creative expansion to the acclaimed *3D Land*, yet we were left a little disappointed. No matter how good this game will be, it won't amaze and awe with the same childish wonder that the *Galaxy* games inspired in us.
Fergal Glean

This lived up to a decade's worth of '*Mario 128*' expectation. Incredible.
Gavin Lane

A game I shamefully dismissed back in 2007, and only finished a couple of years ago. It's a masterclass in level design, innovation and art style.
Martin Hollis

I have never felt a greater sense of pure unbridled joy when playing a videogame, and I fear I never will again. *Super Mario Galaxy 2* may be the better game on paper, but the first defines why Nintendo is such a special company: you can just feel the love that was poured into its creation.
Iain Critien

9

METAL GEAR SOLID

Original format PS1 **Publisher** Konami **Developer** KCEJ **Release** 1998



A compelling and complex story containing a host of iconic characters. Not only did it set a new benchmark in videogame storytelling, but it helped ensure PlayStation's domination of the console market. Sixteen years on, and *Metal Gear Solid* is as good now as it was back then.
Theo Tsangaris

At times it seems like Kojima is playing *you* as the fourth wall is shattered and Codec chatter traces ever more esoteric circles around – well, whatever happened to be on his mind at the time.
James Konik

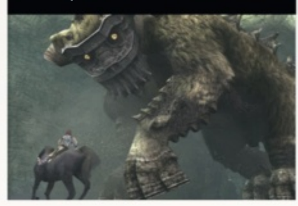
I ended up repeatedly playing the demo of this on my new PlayStation rather than the games that I'd actually bought with the console.
Tom Adams

Incredibly tight and playful, with subject matter that is alternately heady and hilariously juvenile. Also, very camp. Which is a good thing.
Sam Marino

8

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Original format PS2 **Publisher** SCE
Developer Team Ico **Release** 2005



Unlike any other game ever made. An outstanding example of something that is completely unreal, yet feels so real.
Tei One Five

The only game to ever make me feel genuinely remorseful for my actions.
Sean Thomas

The epicness of being on something so big with such fluid, believable animations is truly magical. Hard not to shed a tear every time you down a colossus.
Jojo Kirk

SOTC is a beautiful game and a wonderful experience.
Ben Braine

My right index finger is stronger than ever from holding on to R1 in sheer panic, trying not to lose my grip on a colossus. In the forests outside the Swedish town of Gothenburg, there is a steep cliff with chipped-off stairs. Walking up, you come to a clearing in the woods that leads to a hidden lake up on the hill. The first time I saw it, I was right back into the game.
Claes Johansson

7

GOLDENEYE 007

Original format N64 **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Rare **Release** 1997



I had to import *GoldenEye* from the UK for a high price because the game wasn't released in Germany. Therefore, I was one of the few people in the little town I lived in who had it. When other people realised how great the game was, I got calls from people I hadn't even spoken to before. They offered me all kinds of deals to borrow the game from me and I was king of the town for a couple of weeks thanks to Rare.
Andreas Meissner

Back when multiplayer games involved being in the same room, this game became my social life for five years. It was great in singleplayer, but amazing with a group; it wasn't perfect, but the flaws had their own charm. Many hours were lost shooting rogue rifles poking through walls.
Sean Thomas

A timesink fuelled by brotherly aggression. Created more fraternal quotes that are still used to this day than any other shared experience of our childhood.
Niki Hearns

6

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

Original format Xbox **Publisher** Microsoft
Developer Bungie **Release** 2001



Still the greatest campaign in a firstperson shooter by some margin. Those first battles on the ring's surface promised a future of incredible combat against brilliant AI. In the end, the rest of the world ignored its lessons, but one truly great FPS is better than none at all.
Yann Best

Revolutionised the FPS genre. Regenerative health, a motion tracker, limited weaponry, an immersive alien world, incredible music, perfect splitscreen and the greatest multiplayer map of all time: Blood Gulch.
Luke Boxall

Finally brought a PC-matching firstperson shooter to console, and set the template for the biggest console genre to this day.
David Dahl Hansson

Having had no interest in FPSs on PC, and only a brief taste of the fiddly joys of *GoldenEye*, I tried *Halo* with my newly purchased Xbox and never looked back. *Halo* was revolutionary in so many ways and few other games, if any at all, can claim to be as influential. Just don't mention The Library.
Som Ali

5

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Original format GC **Publisher** Capcom
Developer In-house **Release** 2005



Shinji Mikami's baby is perfectly paced. It's beautiful to behold, with a forward momentum that ensures you stay in its horrifying thrall right up until the very end. At which point, you dive right back in, experimenting with different weapons, tactics and amusingly inappropriate outfits.
Sam Marino

The game that, divisively, changed the genre. It dumped convoluted storylines and bad voice acting in favour of outright theatrics, relentless action and tension. A game with so many standout moments that it's hard to see the series ever surpassing it.
Simon Flatman

A game where the restrictive controls make sense, one that still looks great today, and one that had my flatmates watching as I played through all of it, with their jaws open at every set piece, screaming along, treating it like the big-budget blockbuster it is. The balance it struck and the change in tone at the time was unprecedented.
Martin Hollis

4

FINAL FANTASY VII

Original format PS1 **Publisher** Square/SCE **Developer** Square **Release** 1997



Something about the dysfunctional cast struck a chord, and the world feels so fresh, even today. It is spectacular, gripping and beautiful. Oh, and that ending…
Martin Hinson

While the game has arguably been surpassed in the past 16 years, *Final Fantasy VII* is my Star Wars. It is the piece of media that defined my teenage years and is therefore never likely to be dethroned.
Richard Cadman

There was *Ridge Racer*, *Tekken*, *Tomb Raider*… but I never wanted a PlayStation until *FFVII* emerged. Worth the asking price of the console alone, these are hours I'll never get back, but Square earned every one.
Mike Diver

In my opinion, Cloud's one of the most interesting and nuanced popular game protagonists around.
Ravi Pradhan

The jump from being a Nintendo gamer to a Sony gamer was difficult. This made it much easier.
Martin Charlton

3

HALF-LIFE 2

Original format PC **Publisher** Valve **Developer** In-house **Release** 2004



After playing *Half-Life 2*, I couldn't help feeling that this game knew something that other firstperson shooters didn't. Even all this time after its release, I'm not sure what that thing was, but it's remarkable that the game still feels so far ahead of its time.
Matthew Hadley

Arguably the best game ever made. There was not a single thing about *Half-Life 2* that could be considered anything but top of its class.
Kamil Bazydlo

Still the pinnacle of a genre now sadly lost to the frat party.
Gavin Moffat

Lonely, grey, brimming with the threat of military or alien intervention; much of its atmosphere came from restraint and not bombarding you every moment. Apart from a horrible helicopter attack here and there, I loved it.
Meson W

Valve made it look effortless.
Gavin Lane

2

SUPER MARIO 64

Original format N64 **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Release** 1996



I waited for N64 for years, and even built my own controllers out of modelling clay. Toys R Us had the game and system on display a few days before launch, and my mind was totally blown by playing *Mario* in 3D.
Pat Connor

Pure brilliance. Still the benchmark for 3D platformers. In almost 20 years, only Nintendo's own *Mario Galaxy* has come (so very) close.
Muzher Sharif

A small game store here in Switzerland imported the Japanese version and a bunch of us travelled together to the airport to collect some of the machines straight from Japan. We brought them to the store and took turns, [and were] in awe of what we were experiencing. I'll remember forever when I put my hands on the N64 controller and first roamed the garden in front of the castle, learning the controls. *Mario 64* is one of the best gaming experiences you'll ever have.
Matthias

Few moments will ever compare to those first few freewheeling steps in Peach's garden.
Jason Scott

1

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

Original format N64 **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Release** 1998



It's obvious for a reason. Nothing in gaming will ever beat walking out onto Hyrule Field that first time. Nothing in a game has ever made me feel more at home than that, and it is quite sad to think – I expect – that I'll never get that again from a game, and that I experienced gaming perfection one Christmas morning when I was 11.
Tobyn Maxwell

Never anything less than completely and utterly magical.
Jason Scott

Every game since *Ocarina Of Time* owes something to it.
Thales Nunes Moreira

Before *Ocarina Of Time*, I loved games, but I had never been in love with a game. Since its re-release on 3DS, I get to carry this gem around with me wherever I go. I'm a 35-year-old man who probably should spend more time listening to his wife and walking the dog. I guess this is what perfection does to you.
Graham Atkin



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REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD Wii U
The promised tweaks may not have restored the dungeons that were pulled from the GameCube original, but Nintendo has our eternal thanks for making *Wind Waker*'s Triforce Quest less laborious. Yet while we've saved a few hours of late-game plod, we're losing a lot more time just taking in the sights. This is a treat for the eyes, one that sets a new standard for the HD remake.

Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan DS
Taking Inis' rhythm-action masterpiece for a spin on our box-fresh 2DS was one of this month's thrills. Over The Distance, in which you help a dead man communicate with his lover, is as heart-rending as ever, but the saddest thing about revisiting *Ouendan* is the reminder it provides of Inis' fall from grace. After this came *Lips* and a host of duff iOS games for Square Enix. Where did it all go wrong?

GTA Online 360, PS3
While connectivity issues are part of any online launch, we'd hoped *GTA Online*'s debut would be smoother by virtue of its delayed release. Yet the end of our enforced two-day stay in a Los Santos car park only revealed more problems. Passive mode doesn't do enough to allay griefers, and the focus on deathmatches and races over co-op missions is baffling. But it's nothing that can't be fixed, and there's nothing quite like *GTA Online* when it works.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

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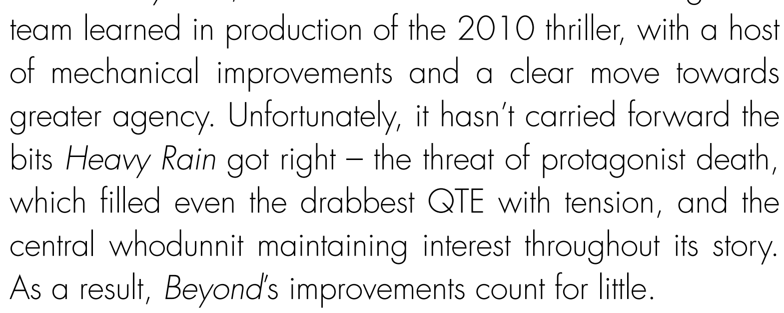


Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

Evolutionary thought

Few studios understand evolution like Game Freak. It's a central theme to the *Pokémon* games, but this isn't just about Bulbasaur's transformation into Ivysaur. The series itself has been steadily – too steadily, perhaps – improving over time. *Pokémon X/Y* (p98) is the biggest evolutionary leap the series has taken yet, with its largest bestiary to date, sprites replaced with 3D models and its gameworld more vividly realised than ever before. 3DS has other games like this – notably *Fire Emblem: Awakening* and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* – which build on the best of what has come before and fix the bad. *Pokémon X/Y*, like those games, is a case study in good sequel-making.





It's a lesson Quantic Dream has yet to learn. *Beyond: Two Souls* (p90) may not be a straight sequel to *Heavy Rain*, but it's full of the lessons David Cage and team learned in production of the 2010 thriller, with a host of mechanical improvements and a clear move towards greater agency. Unfortunately, it hasn't carried forward the bits *Heavy Rain* got right – the threat of protagonist death, which filled even the drabbest QTE with tension, and the central whodunnit maintaining interest throughout its story. As a result, *Beyond*'s improvements count for little.

When we bemoan lazy iteration, it is not because we're being asked to cough up £40 for a few incremental upgrades. Not entirely. Really it's because we know that we're not being offered a better game, but a different one: for every thing fixed, another will be broken. *Beyond* may have been three years in the making but it has the same problems as every annual *FIFA* or *COD*. It's fixing free-kicks while breaking throw-ins; nerfing SMGs while overpowering sniper rifles. An evolving species, after all, only succeeds if its improvements aren't undone by new weaknesses.

Beyond: Two Souls

Given the extent to which games lean on the language of Hollywood, it's a surprise that the '80s action montage sequence isn't borrowed more often. Quantic Dream leans on cinematic underpinnings more heavily than most – something that's made abundantly clear again in *Beyond: Two Souls*, which is displayed not in 16:9 format but a bordered, filmic 2.35:1. But amid the QTE prompts and stick flicks, it's pleasing to see the montage used creatively as a training element in the tutorial. Here, protagonist Jodie Holmes, played by Ellen Page, is put through CIA training that introduces you to the game's mechanics. That's right: mechanics. While this is clearly a Quantic Dream production, there's evidence that the studio no longer wants to be working in another medium.

To a relative extent, anyway. In her CIA getup, Holmes can move from cover to cover, but only between preordained points, and movement is automatic. She can fire a gun, but there's no aiming involved, just a prompted button tap to draw a pistol and another to fire. We traverse monkey bars by holding up on the left stick, press a button for a midway chin-up, then yank the DualShock downwards to return to terra firma. And when we cut to Holmes in the classroom, we press and hold buttons to solve a complex equation. An unseen teacher offers praise and the student protagonist sits back, smiling with satisfaction. We don't.

As in '80s action movies, things improve once the punching starts. There are no button prompts at all here. The action slows down and the screen turns black-and-white as you flick the right stick in the direction of Holmes' movement. This retains the QTE's input method yet fixes its oldest problem: success requires you to pay attention to the action onscreen, rather than ignore it and focus on button prompts. Quick camera cuts turn what would have been a leftward kick into a rightward one, meaning Quantic Dream's directorial ambition becomes a gameplay mechanic in itself.

There are traditional QTEs aplenty, of course, but there are further improvements elsewhere. Simple interactions – getting up from a chair, say, or opening a door – are signalled with a small white blob, and you then flick the right stick in the right direction relative to Holmes' position. And as Aiden, the ghostlike entity to which she has been bound since birth, you have full control, moving around the environment in firstperson perspective using both sticks. Interactive objects are denoted by a blue sphere; press and hold L1 to lock on and two purple blobs appear onscreen. If they're close together, pull them apart; if they're far apart, push them together. These interactions form the core of Aiden's moveset, blasting blockages out of the way, opening closed doors, and knocking objects over to distract NPCs. Enemies surrounded in a red glow can be killed; orange ones can be possessed and moved around.

Publisher SCEE
Developer Quantic Dream
Format PS3
Release Out now

Beyond's engine sets a new standard for moist eyes, and Quantic Dream has no qualms about using it to the fullest



Our ghostly aide can also heal wounds, a mechanic introduced late in the training montage when Holmes pulls a muscle. And by guiding a wispy trail from a body or object to her head, Aiden can help Holmes see into the past, discovering a cause of death, perhaps, or why a rusty sword lies amid the rubble of a Navajo settlement.

Aiden may be the source of greater agency and freedom of movement than we've come to expect from a Quantic Dream game, but this unseen entity is far from the star of the show. David Cage's ambition is to increase emotion in games, and the weight of that sits squarely on Holmes' shoulders. Ellen Page gives a fine and, yes, emotive performance. As *LA Noire* proved, the trick to wringing believable in-game portrayals from big-name talent is to stop sticking actors in a voiceover booth with a script and start performance capturing the whole thing. Facial animation here is perhaps even better than in Team Bondi's police procedural: every wrinkled nose and furrowed brow is believable, bordering on photorealistic.

The most common facial tic, however, is a trembling bottom lip. There's certainly narrative justification for all of Holmes' blubbing – every use of Aiden leaves her with involuntary tears running down her cheeks, and her path to CIA stardom proves far from pleasant – but we suspect technical achievement may also have been a factor. *Beyond*'s engine sets a new standard for moist eyes, and Quantic Dream has no qualms about using it to the fullest. Performance capture has also resulted in some excellent animation, with every new environment and mental state bringing a new walk cycle. A bored toddler kicking her heels, an elegant grown-up sashaying around a cocktail party, a scared young woman gingerly stepping over shards of shattered glass: it's remarkable stuff until you break the spell by doing something the animation system doesn't want you to. Holmes, like her *Heavy Rain* forebears, sports the turning circle of a Routemaster bus.

It's the chapters that focus on Holmes' younger years that come closest to achieving the developer's ambitions. She's shackled to Aiden from birth, snatched from her mother's arms and passed on to foster parents who drop her when the paranormal activity becomes too much to bear. As a puffy-faced child, she's handed off to a government facility and watched over by Nathan Dawkins, played by Willem Dafoe. Adjusting to life on the wrong side of a two-way mirror is a lot to ask of anyone, let alone a six-year-old with a mischievous paranormal partner. Later she'll struggle to fit in at a birthday party, and react with impotent teenage fury after Dawkins refuses to let her go out with her friends. The game's action may come when she's enlisted by the CIA and her burden becomes a military asset, but her early days are the most emotional.

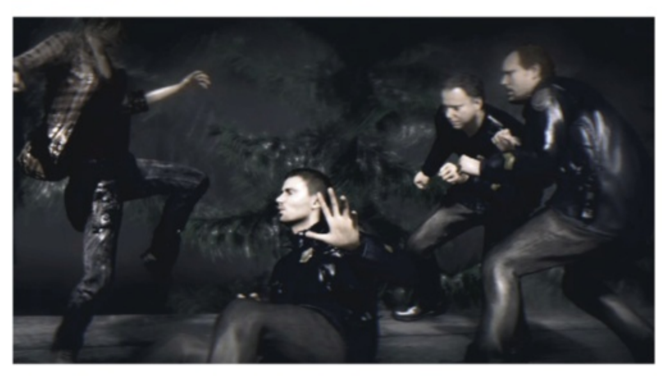
ABOVE Most of Holmes' Somalia mission, in which you must sneak through city streets and rundown buildings in search of a CIA-targeted warlord, takes place at night. One cutscene and seemingly no time later, it's suddenly daytime. LEFT Quantic Dream CEO David Cage is an avowed fan of bokeh, a depth-of-field effect that focuses on the aesthetic quality of out-of-focus objects. It's used frequently and, it must be said, to great effect throughout *Beyond*'s runtime



BELOW Combat works, stripping away the need for button prompts while retaining the QTE's simplicity. Synapses will need rewiring, though: it's your movement, not your assailants', that matters



ABOVE While Ellen Page's performance stays emotive and believable whatever age her in-game equivalent, Willem Dafoe's turn as scientist Nathan Dawkins is muted verging on bland – at least until the late game



This poses a pacing problem, the supposed solution to which is a warped chronology. The game's loading screen displays a timeline, the opening prologue positioned all the way to the right and the bulk of the game jumping around Holmes' past. And it's been quite a life, taking her from moonlit woodland to suburban idyll, and from Navajo desert to snowbound city streets. Yet while the shuffled timeline makes for a satisfying flow of action beats and sensitive drama, there's little narrative justification for such skittish regard for chronology, and some transitions feel arbitrary. The payoff to one action sequence, in which you escape from a burning building, sees you transported back to Holmes' first night in Dawkins' care, which doesn't break up the pace so much as bring it to a shuddering halt. Yet even this is preferable to when chronological service is resumed, and *Beyond* turns into the lukewarm sci-fi hokum you've spent the preceding six or so hours dreading. The cast's true intentions are revealed with few surprises, and you must make one of the few truly important choices that affect the game's ending.

Choice is, as in *Heavy Rain*, arguably *Beyond*'s core mechanic, but your decisions are seldom meaningful. At the aforementioned birthday party, you'll decide whether or not to kiss a boy, and whether to exact revenge after your fellow guests turn on you with childish malevolence. Later you'll decide whether Aiden will ruin a date or play ghostly Cupid (see 'Girl trouble'). Dialogue options are simple roleplay, with none of the repercussions, genuine or implied, of *The Walking Dead*.

Heavy Rain made up for its teeth-brushing and rape-escaping stick flicks with a central mystery and the knowledge that a botched QTE could have fatal ramifications. *Beyond*, by contrast, is a game that is almost impossible to fail. Mess up most combat QTEs and Holmes will take the hit before putting a foe down automatically. Lose a fight and your assailants will be scared off by a police siren. Sometimes failure means capture, and a brief interlude before you escape and are put back on the narrative track. Some of the bigger action sequences will simply end early, and failure may affect the story – there are two dozen endings this time, the branches better hidden by simple virtue of there being no threat of protagonist death. Deliberately fluffing your inputs in the hope of triggering a narrative shift that may not become apparent for several hours doesn't, however, make for much of a videogame.

What a shame given the extent to which *Beyond* reflects its developer's recognition of its past mistakes. This is a far more systemically diverse game than *Heavy Rain*, and its story is certainly more believably told through Holmes, Dafoe and a fine supporting cast. Yet this is a game almost entirely bereft of tension, one in which failure goes largely unpunished and is almost always inconsequential. There is emotion here, but it's felt passively, as spectator instead of player. And at the game's climax, when Quantic Dream falls back on old habits and has you guide Holmes through a supernatural storm by mashing buttons on demand, it's hard to feel anything at all. The studio's commendable dream – of a marriage of mechanics and storytelling that takes videogames to new emotional heights – remains out of reach, and the rivers of photorealistic tears aren't quite enough to make up for it.

5



GIRL TROUBLE

As **E**259's Fear Of Sex feature made clear, Quantic Dream struggles more than most with sensitive representations of the female form. *Beyond: Two Souls* is the studio's third consecutive game to put a female protagonist in the shower for no real reason, with Holmes stepping into an outbuilding and out of her clothing during a brief stay with a Navajo family. There are a few scenes with her in her underwear, too, and early on you'll decide whether an early-teenage Ellen Page is going to put out or not with the tap of a button. You'll face a similar, though immeasurably grimier, decision later on, when Aiden can either ruin a date by slamming doors and upending furniture, or let Holmes have sex. Suddenly we were the ones who needed a shower.

Moments like this should inspire tension and emotion, but it's never going to happen with such a recognisable (and expensive) face onscreen. Unlike *Heavy Rain*, you know *Beyond*'s protagonist is never in any real danger



Post Script

Technology equals engagement? It's not that simple

David Cage, Quantic Dream's CEO, sounded just about the only bum notes at Sony's PlayStation 4 unveiling in February. After showing off his studio's latest technological leap forward with a tech demo of an expressively wrinkled geriatric face, Cage drew a straight line between player emotion and character polycount. *Heavy Rain*'s Madison, he told us, was made of 15,000 polygons; *Beyond*'s Jodie Holmes comprises a whopping 30,000. "In a medium like ours," he said, "technology is very important. It is what we rely on to get the player emotionally involved."

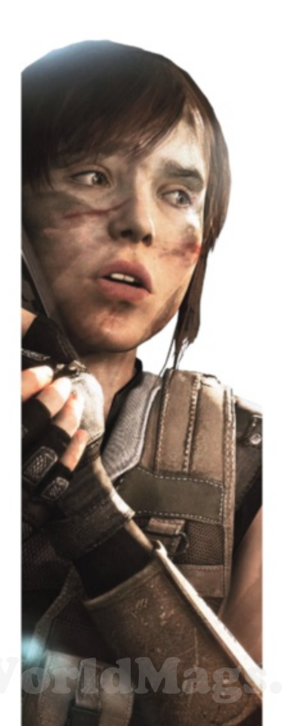
It's a line that says much about the way Quantic Dream makes games, and why Cage is so often criticised for not understanding what makes players tick. In the days that followed his turn on Sony's stage, he was the subject of a predictable glut of angry posts claiming that it's mechanics, not processing power, that inspire emotion in players. Yet you don't have to look too far in order to find a host of games that fly in the face of those players' claims while also countering Cage's argument that processing power is king.

Take *Gone Home*, for instance. The Fullbright Company's debut opens with a girl returning from a trip overseas to find her family's new homestead empty, and she spends the game's slender 100-minute runtime piecing together the story by examining objects in the many empty rooms of her vast new family seat. This is a world almost entirely bereft not only of mechanics, but also of animation. You can move and look, pick up objects and rotate them, doors swing open, lights flicker into life when cords are pulled, and that's about it. Yet this is a far more emotionally resonant game than not only *Beyond*, but almost every other game you'll play this year, a feat it achieves by simple virtue of a story that is sweetly told and intelligently dispensed.

While *Gone Home* spreads its narrative through audio logs and scrunched-up notes in wastepaper baskets, *Journey* doesn't really tell much of a story at all. Players don't even know where they are, why they're there, or if they're even alive. Its protagonist's face is a flat, expressionless texture. The player's mechanical involvement in the game equates to little more than analogue movement (most of the game is spent walking forwards) and an immaculately tuned jump arc. It's a beautiful-looking game at times, too, but few players would tell you that *Journey* was the most emotionally involving game of 2012 because of its technology. Its emotion came from its air of mystery, from the simple pleasure of its streamlined central mechanics, and from its groundbreaking multiplayer component.

Then there's *The Walking Dead*, which perhaps bears the closest relation to Quantic Dream's output to date. It, too, leans heavily on a mix of playable cinematics and exploration of static scenes, on the language of QTEs and dialogue choices. There are further parallels between *The Walking Dead* and *Beyond*: it's no coincidence that the latter game's most emotional moments come when Jodie Holmes is a scared young girl, tapping into similar themes as those that made Clementine such a potent character. Despite surface similarities, however, Telltale's episodic adventure more closely resembles *Heavy Rain*, particularly in the way that its choices have consequences, and that failure is punished. For all its other flaws, *Heavy Rain* had tension, which arose from the lingering threat that its central characters were a few fluffed QTE inputs from death.

> Few would tell you that Journey was the most emotionally involving game of 2012 because of its technology



The likes of *Gone Home*, *Journey* and *The Walking Dead* demonstrate that there are many different ways of emotionally involving players, and challenging not their thumbs but their minds, as Cage himself put it. None put much strain on their host platforms' processors. None would be improved by more polygons. None were made with anything like the $27 million it took to make *Beyond*. Yet none of them, either taken together or in isolation, exposes the glaring flaws in the Quantic Dream leader's mission statement.

That's because there aren't any. For all the opprobrium sent his way, Cage is right: technology is vital. It is a perfectly acceptable claim that a more realistically modelled protagonist can be expected to give a more emotive performance. It's true, too, that the more intricate and believable a game world is, the stronger a player's connection to it will be. And while *Journey* may not have pushed PS3 to its limits, it still needed the power of a modern console. Strip away the visual bells and whistles of its standout moment – surfing through sand in the light of a burnt-orange sun – and remap its analogue controls to digital ones and you're left with *Horace Goes Skiing*.

Beyond's problem isn't that its developer has failed to learn from studios that have similar ideas and goals. It fixes many of *Heavy Rain*'s mechanical problems in smart ways – chief among them its provision of proof that the QTE has a future free of glowing prompts – but it has also left behind a lot of what *Heavy Rain* did right. Choice only matters if there is a consequence to your actions. Mechanics only matter if the difference between success and failure is meaningful. And there's little point in having a lifelike protagonist and a photorealistic world if your story isn't up to the same standard. There's no point in learning new lessons if you allow old ones to be instantly forgotten. Quantic Dream's ambition, then, is not inherently flawed; its problem is execution, and in its failure to recognise not only its past mistakes, but also its successes. ■

Card Hunter

Publisher Blue Manchu
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC (browser-based)
Release Out now

Dorky, lovable and deep, *Card Hunter* has an earnest love for its subject matter. Whether it's in the little exclamations of "Adventure!" and "A-ha!" from its dungeon master, Gary, the complex systems that make up its turn-based, card collection design, or in its descriptions of caverns and sorcerers' towers, this is a game that's built on Dungeons & Dragons foundations and isn't afraid to show it.

D&D and tabletop RPGs have a monolithic presence in videogame culture today. They're certainly a badge of honour among game developers, the genre's twin pillars of rules and storytelling offering a proving ground for professional skills. It can't be a coincidence that a return to videogame grace has coincided with a growing appetite for collectible card games, and *Card Hunter* blends the two forms effortlessly in a F2P browser-based card strategy game that, for all its studied anachronisms, has its finger right on the pulse.

Card Hunter plays in a similar way to classic RPG boardgames such as HeroQuest, its three player heroes placed as counters on flat boards decorated to look like rooms and caves. Its innovation, though, is that every hero's actions are governed by the hand of cards they hold, cards drawn from a deck defined by the armour, weapons and other adornments that hero is wearing. So a pair of boots, for instance, might throw three movement cards into the mix, while a weapon might supply a set of hack-and-slash cards.

The three classes handle very differently: the Warrior's armour adds cards that mitigate damage, parry and block, as well as weapons that add melee moves; the delicate Wizard specialises in ranged spells, burning with fire or hitting distant foes with bolts; and the strongly armoured Priest assists with healing magic and other support cards. Adding more complexity to the mix, each class can be one of three races: the Dwarf's toughness is balanced by a lack of movement cards, the Elf's mobility is countered by low hitpoints, and the Human sits somewhere between the two.

One of the many lessons *Card Hunter* teaches you is that every card has its place. Take, for example, the situation where three Skeletons are bearing down on our Warrior. With a hand of armour-piercing spear stabs and multiple-enemy axe chops, the Warrior would normally be able to stand his ground, but the Skeletons have a unique card, Only Bones, which negates slashing and piercing damage. If only we hadn't disregarded our Priest's Wavering Faith, which could've made the enemy drop Only Bones from their hand. But Spear Of Darkness looked cooler, and now our Warrior is dead.

The game's vast array of items come loaded with cards taken from a pool that numbers in the hundreds, some of which give you negative traits (such as Superstitious, which causes a hero to drop all its cards whenever anyone – friend or foe – dies), presenting an enormous range of tactics to explore. *Card Hunter*'s real victory, though, is its emphasis on RPG development as an intellectually gratifying expanding set of options, rather than just a dopamine-gratifying increase in damage output. By level eight in the singleplayer campaign, you'll have a pack filled with items, some of which will be ideally suited to one of the very specific challenges found across its large map. With heavily armoured Trogs that you can barely sink a hit into, swarms of Kobolds with Mob Attack (which does more damage for each enemy in range), or attack dogs that can score damage bonuses if they get behind you, you'll need to adapt your strategies and loadouts to win.

The real victory is its emphasis on RPG development as an intellectually gratifying expanding set of options

You play with the constant unease that you might get dealt a bum hand, but then again, so might your opponents. There's also always a sense of the possibility that you can snatch victory with a genius move. On the flip side, encounters can sometimes play out like they're not under your control. *Card Hunter* is not as strict as some strategy games, and can devolve into two characters left standing, passing turns until one finally gets to deal the killing blow. But always on *Card Hunter*'s side is the fact that you're responsible for the cards you brought into battle, and given the sheer range of variables in play, it's remarkably well balanced.

The proving ground is multiplayer, where you play heroes locked to the current level cap of 18, which are separate to the ones you cultivate in the campaign. Multiplayer *Card Hunter* is quick-fire – each player plays a single card per turn – which is well suited to live online play, quickly finding similarly skilled matches on its so-far-busy servers, and starting an AI match if it can't. Just like completing encounters in the campaign, a multiplayer victory gives you the chance to open chests with different chances of presenting you with rare, epic and legendary items.

Blue Manchu could easily monetise aggressively here, but resists anything unfair or intrusive. Just under $10 will give you a 30-day membership to the Card Hunter Club, which gives you an extra item in each chest of a certain rarity, and enables you to buy different costumes for your hero, adventure packs that award special rare items on completion, and gold to buy items in shops. But the randomness inherent in the drawing of hands helps to smooth out the sense that players are simply paying to win.

Knowledge of tactics is the most important thing, after all. "Knowing the difference between an Orc and a Goblin is life or death in this business, Gary," insists fictional player Melvin during the campaign. This is a game that takes its fantasy as seriously as it needs to be, which is to say both lightly and with rigour in homage to the communal games that make up videogames' heritage. But it's also a real original.

8



TABLE TALES
The campaign lacks a driving storyline, instead offering a splintered series of short adventures. But over the top of the quests lies a light metanarrative about the fictional players you're playing with: the earnest enthusiast DM Gary and purist nerd Melvin. During encounter intros, Melvin might criticise Gary's lack of knowledge about how to pronounce obscure French medieval weaponry, while Gary may wonder at the fairness of permadeath: "Does that mean two years of campaigning get wiped out because of one unlucky dice roll?"



LEFT The Wizard's ranged spells are vital assets, but this hero needs to be defended by carefully placing your other characters to make her inaccessible to enemy attacks. **BELOW** Most *Card Hunter* shops restock every day, while the rarities shop restocks weekly. The interface is smartly designed considering the sheer number of items available. **BOTTOM** Multiplayer levels often feature victory squares – if you have more heroes on them at the end of a round than your opponent does, you'll get a victory point



ABOVE Each campaign adventure is comprised of up to three levels, which are introduced with Dungeons & Dragons-style text on these illustrated story sheets. Atmospheric extras are read out by the hapless DM, Gary





Post Script

Interview: Dorian Heart, designer

Dorian Hart is a designer on *Card Hunter*, and a man known for his talent running the numbers on games such as *BioShock* (he decided the Big Daddies' hitpoint and damage counts) and *System Shock*. We discussed just how challenging he found balancing *Card Hunter*'s hundreds of cards against each other.

How do you see the game being expanded in future?
There are so many axes of expansion – from a practical standpoint, it's almost endless at this point. We can increase the level cap and add more monsters, items and cards. But there are also sideways directions. There's a great demand for co-op, which we'd love to do. Jon [Chey, Blue Manchu's founder] is already working on multiplayer tournaments. We want to add races and at least one new class, probably more – a Rogue first.

***Card Hunter* involves a vast number of variables. How do you add new classes or cards without breaking the game's balance?**
Very carefully! The game has been extraordinarily challenging to balance. It's like an n-dimensional puzzle where n is always one or two higher than we can reasonably deal with, and pulling on any string causes unravelling in places you would never have expected. So expansion needs to be careful and incremental. In adding a Rogue class, we'd have to think about how every new card combines with everything else we've done. The danger is that a mechanism and card type that seems harmless turns out to cause some unbeatable strategy when combined with something else – and the broader the design gets, the more commonly these problems crop up.

What process do you go through in adding, say, a new card into the game?
We first talk about it at great, great length among all the interested parties on the team. Skaff Elias, who's been consulting, is really the guy we all look to for card balance issues, because he solved a lot of these problems in designing [for] Magic: The Gathering. His advice has been invaluable. Then we design one or more cards of the type we've figured are probably safe, and then there's no other way than to introduce them into the environment via test servers to see what happens, and collect data furiously. As any MMOG does, we reserve the right to tweak things in the shipping game – if some card is being massively overused because we didn't understand some subtleties, we'll tune it, but we have to be judicious because someone may have saved up Pizza [*Card Hunter*'s paid-for in-game currency] to buy it, and bad feelings result. There's certainly no magical pill, no secret formula.



"Hopefully some of the billions of FarmVille players will realise what they're doing is inherently unsatisfying"



So you don't have banks of bots running numbers?
We added bots to stress the server, but I'd be a little sceptical about their ability to test cards and give us usable data, because the AI is very formulaic… If the problem is some combo, an AI can only tell us it's a problem if we thought to give it that combination, in which case we could've probably figured it out!

Why do you think card games and turn-based strategy are experiencing a resurgence of interest?
I don't know! All things are cyclical, right? I guess one possibility is that there's something simpler and more accessible about cards; people understand them and they have a slower pace while offering short, fast games. There are bad trends in games towards Zynga's lowest common denominator nightmare, where people just expect to click on a couple of things and not to have to think about it. Games like *Card Hunter* are a bit of a push back on that; we give you a game where you can sit down for 15 minutes and it's very accessible but you have to think about it. Hopefully some of the billions of *FarmVille* players will realise that what they're doing is inherently unsatisfying.

The beating heart of *Card Hunter* is loot collection – what is it about loot that makes it so powerful?
As dozens or hundreds of games before have shown, loot collection is a spear directly into some primal part of the human brain that's undeniably powerful. Across a broad spectrum of games – and even non-games – it's a part of human nature to collect. In our case, we tried to make it interesting from the tactical side, because the game is about finding a subset of your loot that's best to tackle the next challenge. We tried very hard to make it go sideways and not merely upward – the next thing you find isn't strictly superior to the last thing, but gives you more tactical options, and success in the singleplayer campaign is about figuring out which options are best suited [to a scenario].

Did the free-to-play model bring any challenges?
Not really. From the beginning, we wanted to avoid as many of the odious practices of the current crop of free-to-play games as we could. There are games out there that present themselves as skill games and then slowly switch to pay games, and never have a particular moment when you realise it. We've tried really hard to avoid that. We want the game to be fully enjoyable to someone who doesn't pay us a dime. But we need to eat, so we wanted to add extras that people would enjoy – but they're not necessary to progress. Money is an avenue to speeding up your game, but not giving you anything you couldn't get otherwise. ■

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Pokémon X/Y

An hour into *Pokémon X/Y*, you'll better understand why 2DS exists. In two dimensions, these battles are sensational. Previous games never wanted for tactical tension, but dynamism and spectacle are added in a way that renders a *Colosseum* sequel irrelevant. Nudge 3DS's stereoscopic slider upwards and it's a different story: the framerate dips dramatically, occasionally approaching single digits. And with most overworld locations not even offering 3D – it's used sparingly but effectively in caves and selected interiors – it's clear the effect wasn't a priority for Game Freak. It's a disappointment, but also the most notable issue in what is otherwise one of the most generous and complete handheld games you'll ever play.

As with *Fire Emblem: Awakening* and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, it's no revolution, more a collection of intelligent refinements to a rock-solid framework. However, some of these changes have to be put in the context of a series that, ironically, has evolved at a glacial pace; it says a lot that the ability to walk diagonally feels like a novelty, and that the early receipt of a pair of roller skates will have you gliding around in graceful loops, giddy with your trainer's new-found manoeuvrability. This is still a grid-based environment, with trainers waiting idly by the side of pathways to interrupt you as you skate by, but it's artfully disguised by a camera that rarely stays still.

Your journey through the world of Kalos is a whistle-stop tour of a miniature France: there's a surrogate Eiffel Tower, Brittany's Carnac stones, and a coastal town with a tower that resembles Mont Saint-Michel. It's rendered with a wonderful, wide-eyed innocence, echoing the glee of a first-time tourist excitedly reliving their memories and peppering their anecdotes with amusing exaggeration. Every town here has a boutique, while the central Paris-alike city has no fewer than 15 coffee houses. You're often encouraged to offer tips, but the money you earn from battles will more than cover a few cups of java and a new outfit for every location. If *X* and *Y* aren't the prettiest games on 3DS, their world is rich in detail and flavour, from the stately majesty of the affluent areas to a dilapidated, overgrown hotel whose only guests are squatting punks.

The games' bestiary – the series' largest to date – has had a complete visual overhaul and is thoroughly revitalised for it, with monsters finally represented by 3D models in battle. Animations are smoother and more characterful; some attacks connect with breathtaking force, while others follow a stylus-chewing build-up with a slapstick punchline. The newcomers – of which there are plenty – are inventively realised, too. That's not to say that a few designs won't rankle, of course: if you thought it wasn't going to get sillier than a fridge with eyes, at least one creature here will prove you wrong. The new monsters are joined by a well-chosen

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Game Freak
Format 3DS
Release Out now

The games' bestiary – the series' largest yet – has had a complete visual overhaul and is thoroughly revitalised for it



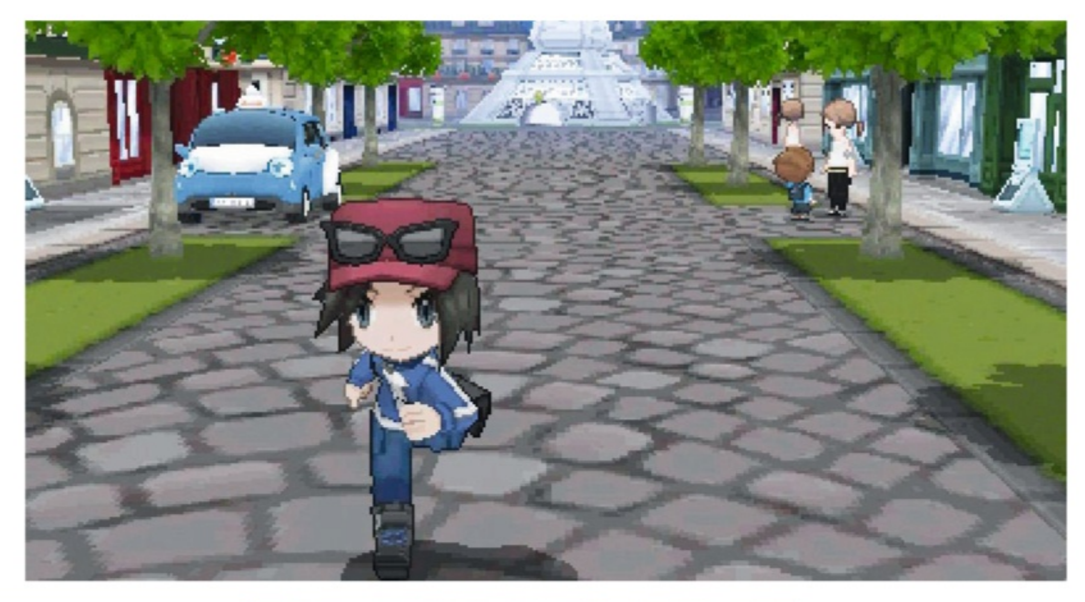
selection from past games, including a generous helping from the oft-ignored Hoenn region, which swells the Pokédex to such numbers that it is split into three. Finally, there are Mega Evolutions, which are temporary powered-up mutations for certain Pokémon that require specific items to initiate. Those raised on *Red* and *Blue* may consider this blasphemy, but it's a thrilling flourish for younger and more open-minded players.

Surprises and discoveries like this are frequent. And, thanks to a simultaneous global release, players all over the world will be figuring things out at the same time, rather than relying on a stream of secondhand information from Japan. But the games' excellent pacing plays a part, too. While the structure of *X/Y* may be identical to previous *Pokémon* games, everything moves a little quicker: those roller skates make backtracking less of a chore, while Experience Share items distribute XP points across your whole party, all but eradicating the need to grind. You can strengthen your bond with Pokémon through a Tamagotchi-esque minigame or by participating in short, skill-based activities to earn a virtual punch bag that can increase their base statistics. Such systems don't have the nuance or depth of the laborious IV/EV training regimen employed by some tournament players, but offer an accessible way for everyone else to give their party a boost.

Everywhere you look, there are refinements. A brand new elemental type, Fairy, will no doubt have a significant impact on the dominance of Dragon types in the competitive game. The Player Search system offers tangible improvements to trading and battling, both locally and online. You'll engage in sky battles, encounter hordes of wild Pokémon, and grind rails as a more stylish way to get around. Even the patronising early game has been streamlined. Few RPGs offer such a convincing sense of journey without resorting to bloated runtimes, and fewer still are intuitive enough for a five-year-old to parse yet deep and flexible enough to cater for a wide range of playstyles.

Those qualities never really went away, of course, although some of the series' original magic had been lost across so many iterative updates. And while the disappointment of the lacklustre 3D implementation here never entirely fades, the thrill of the new is undeniably back. Make no mistake: this is a pair of games that will lead to formative moments in young lives, moments of the kind that will inspire a lifelong passion for the medium. In the games' improved communication features, too, *X* and *Y* are truer to their narrative's ethos: the joy of sharing moments of beauty and surprise with others. It's a delightful message to send to a new generation of players, many of whom are just starting out on their own gaming journey. There can be few better places to do so.

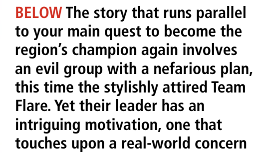
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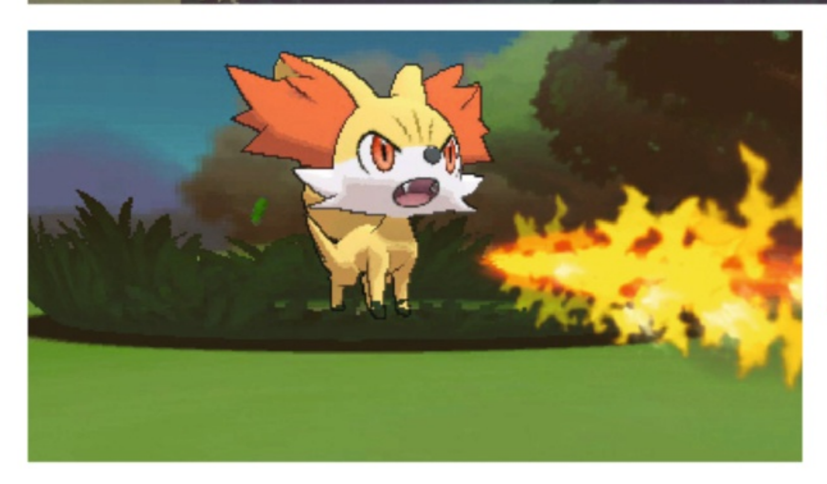
RIGHT For the first time, you can tailor your trainer's appearance with a selection of hats, shoes and accessories to complement your outfit. You can even produce a short PR video for your trainer, which can be shared with other players, while the ability to take photos of key locations adds to the sense of embarking on a journey



LEFT There's a substantial endgame, with several areas inaccessible until you've become the champion of Kalos. With a massive Pokédex, catching 'em all might take some time, though the improved pacing makes it a less arduous pursuit



BELOW The story that runs parallel to your main quest to become the region's champion again involves an evil group with a nefarious plan, this time the stylishly attired Team Flare. Yet their leader has an intriguing motivation, one that touches upon a real-world concern





LEFT Subtle dialogue changes and animations in battle encourage you to spend more time with the Pokémon-Amie system, where you care for your monsters. Creatures with which you develop a strong affinity will look back to you for orders, and their increased focus may even lead to more frequent critical hits

Rain

Fumito Ueda sits at the bottom of a long list of names picked out for special thanks during *Rain*'s closing credits, and given Acquire's evident infatuation with the *Ico* creator's work it's surprising he isn't afforded greater prominence. Judging by the storyline, the studio is clearly enchanted by the whimsy of Sony stablemates *Flower* and *The Unfinished Swan*, too, but even as it lets them saturate its game, Acquire fails to understand what makes its influences tick.

For all its aspirations, the studio has built *Rain* around a gimmick that is very much its own. You play a boy drawn into a world of spectral beings and a never-ending rainstorm, in an effort to save a girl from a mysterious pursuer known simply as the Unknown. In this non-corporeal place, you are only visible onscreen and to enemies when in the rain, the falling droplets outlining your damp silhouette. Duck under an awning or move indoors, though, and you'll disappear from sight, only picked out by splashes in puddles, the physics-enabled objects you disturb, or the little puffs of dust that rise from your lingering footprints.

It's a beautiful artistic conceit, full of mechanical promise that sadly goes largely unfulfilled. While *Rain* makes every effort to telegraph your position onscreen, distant footfalls can be difficult to distinguish against the attractive but uniformly desaturated colour schemes of its Franco-Italian setting, especially when the fixed camera switches between perspectives.

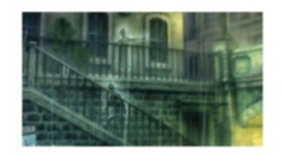
Perhaps that's why *Rain* is so profoundly linear. Acquire repeatedly teases you with large, open-looking spaces through which, you soon discover, there is only one route. The solution to every blockage or puzzle is placed directly in your path, and then highlighted by the camera and narration just in case you missed the cart with a handle sitting a few feet from that ledge you can't quite reach. These moments are punctuated by a series of chase sequences that funnel you down set routes as the Unknown closes in, usually thwarted at the last moment by a gap that only a child can squeeze through.

For the first few chapters it's easy to put this excessive hand-holding down to the desire to ease you into its intriguing premise, but by the end of the final chapter Acquire still hasn't loosened its grip. Coming from the studio that made its name with the freeform *Tenchu: Stealth Assassin*, this is especially surprising. As a result, potentially interesting ideas – muddy puddles that leave residue on you, for instance, or turning enemies against each other – are never fully explored.

This heavy-handed nannying leads to inconsistencies. Platform edges are a lottery, with some surrounded by invisible walls and others letting you fall to your death. A wall of a certain height may be scalable or impassible depending on its relation to the critical path. Given how prescribed your route through the game is, these issues never confuse or impede, but they do serve to highlight your lack of agency. And such inconsistency afflicts the small cast of enemies you'll face along the way too.

Publisher SCEE
Developer Acquire
Format PS3
Release Out now

Acquire's unwillingness to trust players to find their own way through the world strangles much of the life out of its game



COVER BAND
Rain's soundtrack is, for the most part, a wonderful mix of classical piano pieces and organ-driven music that owes a debt to Amélie composer Yann Tiersen. It's a striking mix, quite unlike that of any other game, which reinforces the sense of otherworldly in Acquire's lonely town. The effect is only let down by a vocal arrangement of Debussy's Clair De Lune, which closes the game. It is reminiscent of *Ico*'s composition, You Were There, but in its saccharine excess, *Rain*'s take is indicative of the sense of misunderstood imitation that pervades the game.

They're a fearsome bunch on first sight, gnarled skeletons with willowy tendons stretched taut between bones, and just as capable of disappearing under shelter as you are. All, bar one docile creature, are capable of killing you instantly too – not least the Unknown, which stalks you relentlessly. But any threat is undermined when you realise that it's possible to run within inches of the dog-like creatures, across metal gratings or even clattering through tables and chairs, without alerting them to your presence. Splash in a puddle a few feet away, however, and they'll come running.

It's a promising setup, using the invisibility proffered by cover and sound cues for distraction to sneak your way past enemies, but you're never given the opportunity to improvise. One encounter with the Unknown requires you to find a key to unlock a door in a ruined church. The task is superficially complicated by a fallen roof, which allows the rain in, and the fact that carried objects are always visible even when you aren't. But all you need do is move back along the only available (and entirely covered) pathway, play the church organ to distract the Unknown, then walk back to retrieve the key after it leaves.

While you spend the first portion of the game trying to catch up with the girl, when you eventually do, the two children help each other to progress, with simple puzzles involving both of them – using a clown doll to attract the attention of enemies while the other sneaks past, for example. The relationship between them is portrayed sweetly through subtle animations, and the way that the boy looks up and reaches out to catch the droplets before he moves from shelter back into the rain is heartwarming.

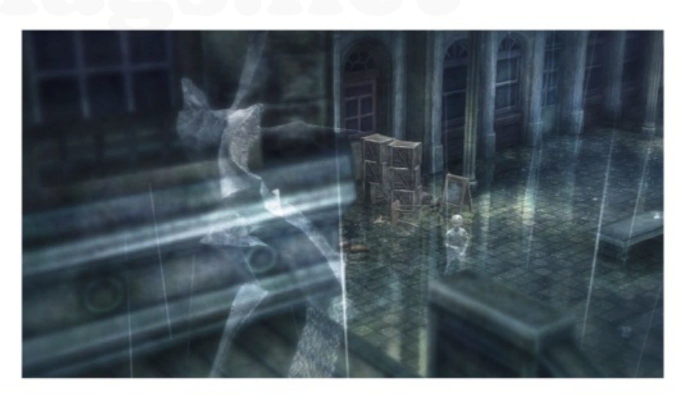
But in keeping with other areas of the game, Acquire insists on labouring the point with overbearing narration where a gesture would have sufficed. *Rain* still manages to engender a real sense of childlike wonder and isolation, but it always feels like a hollow facsimile of the games it aspires to. That feeling is reinforced by the absence of names for anyone, or anything, in the game: the boy, the girl, the Unknown. There's a fine line between being enigmatic and coming up empty.

Acquire has crafted a beautiful world, and set up some fascinating concepts, but its unwillingness to trust players to find their own way through them strangles much of the life out of its game. The dangers of a developer following fashion rather than its heart when it comes to imbuing a game with emotional depth – faux or otherwise – are laid bare here. *Rain*'s core ideas remain frustratingly underdeveloped throughout, and it comes off more like a watercolour sketch than the oil painting that was promised.

5



Despite a limited colour palette, *Rain* is unrelentingly beautiful. Acquire's artists have created a world that evokes both sentimentality and loneliness in the same way that Studio Ghibli has proven so capable of







TOP The Unknown is a disquieting presence, initially in pursuit of the girl but subsequently coming after you, too. It has a pointed finger reminiscent of an aye-aye's, and an extended arm that it uses as a primitive weapon. **CENTRE** You'll often find yourself helping the girl avoid or escape her pursuer, by causing a distraction or moving scenery to allow her to pass through. She repays your efforts deeper into the game. **LEFT** These looming beasts are the only creatures in the game, other than the girl, that mean you no harm. Instead, their wide bodies shelter you from the rain, providing moving cover. Their potential is barely explored, however

Sonic: Lost World

Should time travel ever become a reality, you can send us straight back to the early '90s so we can tell all those people who wrote into the game magazines of the era that they were right. OK, back then they were making it up – their friend's dad never really was an industry insider – but here we are: a new Sonic The Hedgehog game, exclusive to Wii U and 3DS, that's published not by Sega, but *Nintendo*. Sadly, neither Sonic Team nor the blue hedgehog himself have much clout these days, and *Sonic: Lost World* is a far cry from the game those '90s dreamers had in mind.

Continuing the Hell-freezing-over theme, series antagonist Dr Robotnik – sorry, Eggman – spends most of *Lost World* as an ally to Sonic and Tails (although the latter only appears in the cutscenes that bookend the lengthy levels). Eggman's still the bad guy at the outset, capturing Sonic's furry friends and encasing them in his various deadly robot designs. It's in pursuit of their moustachioed aggressor that Sonic and Tails crash land on the otherworldly Lost Hex, a planet made of hexagons serving as Eggman's new base of operations. The villain's not just there because of the planet's platformer-friendly climates and varied topography, but to enlist the services of The Deadly Six, a native band of cartoonish ne'er-do-wells and *Lost World*'s bosses.

But Eggman being Eggman, he's not recruited them so much as enslaved them using the song of a mystical conch. When Sonic knocks it from his hand, the Six are freed, and Sonic and Eggman are forced to work together. Despite this unlikely union, this is definitely Sonic's game, and any external influence on proceedings has come not from within the *Sonic* universe, but another platform holder's mascot with whom he jostled for prominence in the 16bit era.

This isn't quite *Sonic Galaxy*, however. OK, some levels send you ping-ponging from one small sphere to another, but they're the exception, not the rule. The bulk of the action switches between traditional 2D sidescrolling and into-the-screen 3D in the style of Wii's *Sonic And The Secret Rings*. The latter sections feel more *Super Monkey Ball* than *Super Mario* – you're not moving Sonic around the level but the ground beneath his feet, something that's put to smart use in one instance by letting you send oncoming boulders careening off course and into the abyss. It can, however, be disorienting, especially when control is abruptly returned to you after the automatic forward momentum from a chain of boost and jump pads runs out, leaving you upside down and perilously close to a fatal drop. Such moments are rare, but do contribute to the game's fractured pace. Sonic is built for speed, but only really shows it in moments when control is wrested from you. There are so many traps and enemies that you're best off taking it slow anyway, although you're given a wide set of tools to compensate for all the danger.

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Sonic Team/Dimps
Format 3DS, Wii U (version tested)
Release Out now (EU, JP), Oct 29 (US)

Sonic is built for speed, but he only really shows it in moments when control is wrested from you



While Sonic's traditional moveset remains – a jump, spin attack, dash and the homing attack introduced in Dreamcast outing *Sonic Adventure* – he has a few new tricks at his disposal. Results are mixed. He can run up walls briefly before gravity kicks in. He can pull himself up ledges, too, though the laborious animation further breaks up an already stuttering pace. Deliberately placed power-ups give brief access to GamePad trickery, using the touchscreen to drill below ground, for instance, or the gyroscope to point a crosshair at a nearby landmass in one of the more overt nods to *Mario Galaxy*.

There's a double jump, too. It's smartly balanced in theory – it takes you out of your spin state and the invincibility that comes with it, making you vulnerable to enemy attacks – but it's botched in execution. It's mapped to the same button as the homing attack; lose a lock-on and rather than dive in for the kill, you'll jump briefly into the air before falling on your intended quarry. The reverse can happen, too, when a lock-on you didn't want sends you plummeting to your doom chasing an enemy that's just fallen off a platform, or right onto the spiky exterior of a foe, knocking you back, your collection of rings scattering around you.

In fact, you'll be hit so frequently that you'll soon decide to ignore rings almost entirely. Whether you've got one or a hundred, you're only a single mistake away from losing the lot, and then another hit from death. Unless you're chasing a leaderboard spot, one ring is all you really need. There's the same satisfaction to be had from following the developer's breadcrumb trail of rings through a level as you get with *Mario*'s coins or *Rayman*'s Lums, but satisfaction is the only reward on offer, with no extra lives for collecting a certain amount.

And it's here that *Lost World* falls apart. While *Mario* games spit out 1-Ups with such frequency that you question whether the lives system needs to be there at all, *Lost World* takes the opposite tack. There might be the odd extra life hidden away in a level, but its stages are so long (the timer frequently ticks down from 15 minutes) and its use of trial and error so extreme that you'll quickly become closely acquainted with the Game Over screen. Stages are best thought of as four or five levels stitched together. Fail on the fourth or fifth, and you're sent back to the first. Die once or twice early on in a stage and the most efficient course of action is to lose your remaining lives as quickly as possible.

Sonic games, and platformers in general, have always been about memorising the lay of the land, but rarely have mistakes been so costly or heavily punished, and it says much that one retailer's preorder bonus consists solely of 25 additional lives. This isn't a question of difficulty, but of design: unfortunately for Sonic, people who have grown up with Nintendo hardware have come to expect much better than this.

4



ABOVE While you move the ground beneath Sonic's feet in the into-the-screen sections, this world's rotation has its limits. Jump towards a wall and it won't turn into the floor; instead, Sonic will wall run briefly along it.
LEFT A single hit will do for the upper half of these foes, though Sonic gets trapped on the cycle part that remains. It'll explode after a few seconds, but you can break free by mashing buttons

BELOW Skydiving sections are infrequent, the most memorable coming in a boss fight against a foe whose ground pound rockets you up into the air. The spiked balls it launches only complicate matters



ABOVE This platform rotates constantly, and its trail of spikes needs careful navigation. Things get harder when the spikes run around the inside of a tunnel, the camera struggling to keep up with drastic changes of direction





Wii Party U

W*ii Party U* has no rhythm, and you won't realise just how crucial that is to a party game until it's gone. Forget *Game & Wario*'s bubble-wrap-popping immediacy: this party game could bring the wildest shindig to a ponderous crawl.

One problem is its multitude of gametypes. Some games use the GamePad, some rely on Remotes, others bring both into play, and every ruleset needs to be slowly explained to newcomers or reiterated for those out of practice. This sounds like nitpicking, but it's crucial: *Wii Party U* spends at least as much time explaining itself as it does letting you have fun.

It's not that Nintendo hasn't crafted a glut of silly asymmetrical treats around its newest controller. But the fact that there's only one of the device can hobble proceedings. One boardgame, GamePad Island, builds dice rolls around GamePad challenges. And while this leads to a cluster of quick-fire minigames, it requires that the device is passed between turns. The waiting is compounded by a surprising amount of dead time: those dice rolls, watching Miis saunter around, clicking past a confirmation message after passing the GamePad.

Still, only one-third of *Wii Party U* apes *Mario Party*. The other two-thirds provide a clutch of silly parlour games and a suite of competitive twoplayer GamePad-based treats. *Wii Party U* seems most comfortable offering mere social silliness, such as a game in which one player must pull a ridiculous expression, which is duly snapped by the controller's camera and displayed onscreen. The remaining players then have to guess, for instance, whether your contorted features mean you're "smelling something good" or concerned because "your eyebrows ran away". It's fun and, like fellow Wii U game *Spin The Bottle: Bumpie's Party*, should work pretty well with the kind of inhibition-relaxing beverages that Nintendo would never endorse.

Having said that, there's some simple and childish stuff in here, too, leaving *Wii Party U* a confused proposition. One game, Fast Food Frenzy, is a memory test in which up to three players order food and then the GamePad wielder duly delivers it. That's it. One of the twoplayer GamePad minigames, meanwhile, is a card-matching game based on barnyard animals' faces; it's tedious for all but the very youngest of players, and fails to offer anything that you couldn't experience with a cheap iPad download or, let's face it, a pack of cards.

There's a familiar, welcoming charm to *Wii Party U*, which offers an evening spent in the company of nice-but-quiet friends. We wouldn't blame you, however, if you snuck out to visit the more vibrant party hosted by Wario or Bumpie next door.



Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format Wii U
Release October 25 (US, EU), 31 (JP)



DUELLING GAMEPAD
The GamePad minigames are among *Wii Party U*'s best, but they're undermined by the fact that only two players can get involved at once. That said, more can play in a tournament mode if you have the patience. Our favourite is Mii-In-A-Row. It's a connect-three minigame in which you make Miis out of head, torso and leg tiles. The twist is that whoever wins a minigame between rounds gets to flip one of the losers' pieces, breaking up one of their Miis.

This simple game requires you to offset your character's tilt using the GamePad's gyroscopes. It sounds straightforward enough on paper, but the timing varies, which can cause you to preemptively counterbalance



Sokobond

Publisher/developer Alan Hazelden and Harry Lee
Format PC
Release Out now

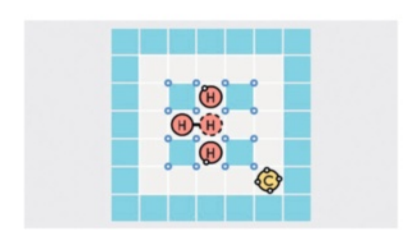
Breaking Bad may have finished, but if you're searching for more chemistry-themed entertainment then you could do worse than *Sokobond*. This PC title presents a molecule-constructing twist on block-pushing puzzles in general, and *Sokoban*, the Japanese puzzler from which it gets its name, in particular.

Recalling the atom diagrams we had to painstakingly draw in chemistry classes, *Sokobond*'s molecular theme helps make its abstractions easier to grasp. You're not just moving a blue block so it's positioned between two red blocks, but sliding an atom of oxygen with two gaps for potential atomic bonds between two hydrogen atoms, which each have a single electron to spare. The result? A single molecule of water and a completed puzzle.

You always control a single atom, and the block-pushing heritage can be seen in the way you use it to nudge or tug other atoms around *Sokobond*'s small puzzle chambers before slipping it into place to form a molecular chain. There's an elegance in this combination of block and block pusher, from its minimalist, colour-coded visuals to its equally simple musical chimes. Each atom has an associated note, so each completed molecule plays a short tune.

Sokobond introduces complexity via level furniture that breaks bonds or lets you adjust the position of bonded atoms, but even the basic chambers provide ingenious challenges. Forget chemistry: it takes alchemy to produce a puzzle game as refined and smart as this.

9



Ookibloks

Publisher/developer Lampert & Sons
Format iOS
Release Out now

Everything about *Ookibloks* – from its name to its art to its music – makes you wonder whether you're rediscovering some lost arcade classic. It's a game that feels old-fashioned in the best way: its bright, happy visuals belie a fierce but fair challenge, its controls are simple and responsive, and its soundtrack will soon be on your brain's internal playlist.

Vertical and horizontal swipes send your simian avatar hurtling through block mazes, your objective being to hit every banana block within. You can avoid the patrolling enemies – swimming penguins, hovering pterodactyls, dive-bombing hermit crabs – but often you'll be forced to remove them from the equation by stunning them with a piece of hanging fruit you've dislodged and striking them before they recover.

Though the goal never changes, the levels grow steadily more devious, adding various special tiles without ever losing that irresistible simplicity. You're rewarded for speed with combo multipliers, though obtaining the last few bananas often requires careful thought. Yet you'll be punished for dawdling: the invincible Devil Cat will appear after a while, prompting a frantic dash for the final blocks.

Purchasable power-ups, while a welcome option for those who want to see the later levels, rather dissipate the tension, but these are the only misstep. With a clutch of intricate puzzle stages and some tough daily challenges, *Ookibloks* challenges mind and thumbs in equal measure.

8



Where's My Water? 2

Publisher Disney
Developer In-house
Format iOS
Release Out now

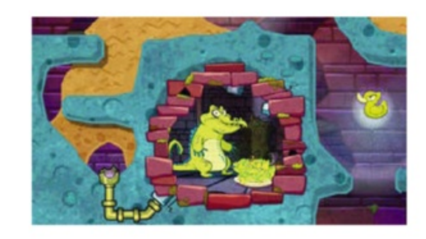
Coming as a sobering reminder of the perils of free-to-play, *Where's My Water? 2* is quite evidently a business model first and a game second. You could make similar claims of a number of titles, but few are quite so cynical as this.

As before, you dig through rock with your finger to guide water, steam and poison to one of three crocodiles, collecting ducks on the way. This time, levels are transformed by additional challenges: you might have to avoid switches or pipes on the way down, or collect five musical notes in the right order. Upside-down stages are little more than padding, however, while the irritating auto-scrolling levels that see you labour to keep your water onscreen are likely to prompt a number of retries.

That wouldn't be a problem but for an energy meter that depletes after every attempt; once it's empty, you either pay for a refill or wait 30 minutes. You can extend the meter via a 69p purchase, yet there's no way of stopping it running dry, which only exacerbates the frustration of the more intricate challenges. Power-ups make it easier to get all your ducks in a row – necessary for the strict tallies required to unlock later stages – though again you'll have to pay.

Connect to Facebook, and your promotional efforts will be rewarded with refills and power-ups. Those who fail to do so can expect a large reminder of their noncompliance after every stage. It's the final straw: while the original aimed to capture hearts, the sequel only seems to be after our wallets.

4



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p108, where we talk to Dan Pinchbeck, head of *Dear Esther* and *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs* developer The Chinese Room, about interactive storytelling and how his studio is leaving linearity behind with open-world PS4 exclusive *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*. On p110, we take a trip to that most overused of videogame environments, the sewer, which can hold everything from large rats to societies in miniature. On p112, we look back on *Fable II*'s dog, perhaps gaming's finest realisation of man's best friend. In our Studio Profile on p114, we visit Sumo Digital, the Sheffield studio that, with sensitive treatments of *Sonic*, *Virtua Tennis* and *OutRun*, has spent a decade proving that being called a 'safe pair of hands' needn't be faint praise. The Making Of… on p118 looks at *TowerFall*, the first great exclusive on Android-based microconsole Ouya. Our columnists bring the issue to a close, with Tadhg Kelly (p122) invoking *The Last Of Us*, *Minecraft* and Jim Morrison in an examination of our focus on the meta-conversation. Clint Hocking (p124) looks at how the improvements of the past 30 years have helped make simulation games more intricate, yet the industry is unwilling to use all that processing power make games about people and relationships. And James Leach (p126) asks, in a world where *GTAV* exists and Breaking Bad has ended, whether the future of game storytelling rests with those who dare to be different, rather than aping Hollywood at ever-greater expense.



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Amigo is one of the many Sega characters Sumo Digital has been entrusted with. We find out how the studio stays creative within publishers' limits on p114



People

DAN PINCHBECK

The Chinese Room's founder is exploring new ways to tell stories

"I think if we've made one small contribution to game storytelling," Pinchbeck says, "it's that players can handle ambiguity; they'll work at stories [and] don't have to be spoonfed everything"

CV

URL www.thechineseroom.co.uk
Selected softography *Dear Esther* (2007, 2012), *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs* (2013), *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* (TBC)





Dear Esther's ruggedly bleak Hebridean vistas might imply a childhood spent in the wilds of Scotland, but the game's writer, **Dan Pinchbeck**, grew up in a cosy village outside Brighton. "It was a pretty ordinary middle-class 1970s childhood, I guess," he says. "We spent most of our time playing on railway tracks, making camps in the wood, setting fire to things – the usual stuff." Then, at the age of 11, Pinchbeck's elder brother invited him to play Dungeons & Dragons and he found a new hobby, which grew into an obsession. "I'd been playing early console and computer games since I was about five," Pinchbeck explains, "but D&D was a whole other thing. For the next ten years, I played any roleplaying game I could get my hands on. I spent a long time making my own as well."

RPGs dominated the young man's leisure time, but his interests were broad. Pinchbeck played in punk bands and acquired an interest in the theatre, which led to him joining an open-air theatre company as a "terrible" actor, and "half-decent" stage manager and fight choreographer. His diverse influences perhaps account for the versatility in tone and style demonstrated by The Chinese Room's first two titles: the melancholic tale of *Dear Esther* and grimly distressing horror piece *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*.

Videogames remained an important part of Pinchbeck's life during university, where he played and modded *Doom* and early MUDs (multi-user dungeons) in the computer science department. "It was through those games that I first fell for writing in interactive environments," he explains. After university, Pinchbeck was unemployed. "I never had time and money at the same time. I skipped a hardware generation, really. But I remember borrowing a friend's PlayStation and *Tomb Raider III*, and being blown away its sheer scale. I think those two games – *Tomb Raider III* and *Doom* – are probably the most formative games for me, even though I'd been playing for a couple of decades."

"I love the immediacy of firstperson. It implicates you in the action so powerfully"

Pinchbeck studied American avant-garde theatre at university. "That had led me to the fusion of new media tech and theatre through companies like The Wooster Group and more live art, performance art practice." And a job in marketing at the Colchester Arts Centre forged an interest in live art. "It makes me laugh when people call our videogame work 'out there'," he says. "I've seen people eat broken glass, gaffer tape fireworks to their genitals and play trumpet naked with a bucket on their head, all in the name of art."

Despite his experiences modding *Doom* and copying code from the back of magazines into his ZX Spectrum as a child, Pinchbeck didn't know that he could make games without formal training in programming. "I'm a lousy coder and artist, and at that point game writing as such didn't really exist," he says. "I'd done some work with VR art, and started a PhD into using story to boost the sense of immersion in VR… I had a bit of a facepalm moment when I played *TimeSplitters* and realised there were much cooler massmarket virtual realities that I could be looking into that had greater potential to do fun things with story."

Pinchbeck describes his switch from the world of theatre to videogames as a "stumble" brought about by "a mixture of luck and ineptitude". He secured a placement as a lecturer at Portsmouth University after being made redundant from his post as director of a unit affiliated with Loughborough University. "They had a scheme where people coming in from industry got to do a PhD, which sounded like fun. Through that I discovered that I love teaching." For his PhD, Pinchbeck gathered baseline data on FPS games in order to "paint a more accurate picture of what a period of FPS history looked like". He counted the NPCs, weapons and environments in sample games. "This chucked up all kinds of interesting questions around the relative importance of story, or whether you could change a player's interpretation of action radically using nothing but story. It struck me that there were only two options: to theorise off into the dark and try to basically guess the answers, or to try to practically hit some of these questions by attempting to build a game. The studio began with me thinking I ought to put my money where my mouth is."

The Chinese Room – then consisting of Pinchbeck and his partner, Jessica Curry – began creating mods and small-scale projects to explore single ideas. "We'd try something out, dump it on Mod DB, track responses and get an idea of what players thought of things in a more natural context," he recalls. "Fundamental to that was that it wouldn't be bracketed as a research question, so we could get a better sense of whether players thought it was viable as a game experience. But then you start developing and it's exciting as hell, and you realise you don't just want to answer a research question, you want to make a great game." The pair began to develop a *Half-Life 2* mod called *Dear Esther*, which would bring together the fruits of their research. They made it public, and it secured over 100,000 downloads.

***Dear Esther* would** become a commercial project when 3D environment artist Robert Briscoe contacted Pinchbeck in 2009 offering to work with the team to rebuild the mod with high-quality art. "We got about a year into that build, and Rob was making some amazing work, but we really wanted to update the soundtrack and extend the voiceover work," says Pinchbeck. To support that ambition, the team applied to the Indie Fund. "We hoped we might make 20,000-odd sales, and that would be enough to pay back Indie Fund and get Rob and Jessica some money for all the work they had done for free over the two and a half years it took to make."*Dear Esther* sold in excess of 750,000 copies.

This success led to The Chinese Room working on a sequel to *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. While tonally the two games are worlds apart, they both share a firstperson perspective. "It's kind of my obsession," Pinchbeck admits. "I love the immediacy, the intimacy, of firstperson. It implicates you in the action so powerfully, so much more than thirdperson. If you are interested in emotional experiences – exploring reality, ambiguity – that becomes incredibly powerful."

Today Pinchbeck is working on PS4 exclusive *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, an open-world game that expands on his ideas. "*Rapture* came from looking at where we wanted to go next from *Dear Esther*: to evolve from linear to non-linear and explore an open-world setting, and to look at ways of bringing the player more physically into the world. We had these ideas about doing more with environmental storytelling, more interaction, and then at the same time I'm interested in looking at aspects of postapocalyptic games that seemed underexplored. I read John Wyndham and Richard Matheson, and watched Threads… I want to tell a story about the end of the world, but away from the likes of *Fallout* and *Metro*. This is something very intimate, very British." ■



Places

THE SEWER

Why are games so fond of flushing players down the drain?

Dark Souls' sewer level, The Depths, is a cesspool of pesky status effects – poison, toxicity, curses – meaning torch-wielding hollows are the least of your worries

After traversing slums and museums, graveyards and forests in Naughty Dog's acclaimed survival horror game *The Last Of Us*, you come to a large metal grate set in a stony hillside, the water cascading from its lip pooling at your feet. You lift the grate and your party clambers into the darkness, where flashlight beams rove over the rusted, mossy interior of a pipe with a murky stream at the bottom. It opens out into an improbably elaborate industrial complex of larger pipes and stained concrete chambers, festooned with lush sunless vegetation and sunk in deep pools. Strewn about milk crates, bedding and lawn chairs suggest the remnants of subterranean society, and rats squeak startlingly in dark corners. There are duct covers to pry open, screeching valves to be turned, sluice gates to be opened.

In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Last Of Us*, the necessity of utilising such an unusual and unsavoury passageway is perfectly logical. But even without a clear rationale, gamers have learned not to think twice about descending into the sewers and tromping through god knows what to get to where they're going. Bizarrely, when you think about it, the sewer has been an archetypal videogame environment since the dawn of the console age. Of course, in videogame sewers, human waste is nowhere to be seen, euphemised as poisonous water or fumes. But the concept is still kind of rank. We might pause to consider the enduring appeal of playing, as it were, where we do our business, especially when we could be visiting a much more pleasant forest or tropical level.

The appeal may be mostly for game designers, who find in the sewer an ideal framework for their mazes and switches. They can be a handy narrative means of getting players into secure locations, and their waters, whether they work as flowing conveyor belts or insta-death pits, offer possibilities for expanded gameplay mechanics. But like escort missions and perfunctory stealth segments, sewer levels seem to be more often tolerated than relished by gamers. They usually feature drab, generic colours and textures, but when you've seen one sewer, you've pretty much seen them all – and they have a reputation for being tediously difficult, with hard-to-navigate lookalike corridors and status-effect-inducing enemies or environmental effects.

The sewer may be the most iconic videogame location that's nobody's favourite. In an interview with us in 2011, *Dark Souls* creative director **Hidetaka Miyazaki** confessed that "during playtesting, there were many players who didn't like The Depths [the game's sewer stage], so we created a method of clearing the game even if you don't clear The Depths".



The Last Of Us **emphasises the desperate predicament of its society by placing signs of human habitation in its sewer system**

Nothing prepares you to summon gods and face ancient evils like bashing rats with a wooden stick

Just as you expect to slide on ice, sewer levels have developed their own stock logic. In games from *Eternal Sonata* to *Final Fantasy XII*, the sewer serves as a rat-killing training ground, because nothing prepares you to summon gods and face down ancient evils like bashing rats with a wooden stick. In games from *Batman: Arkham Asylum* to *MGS3: Snake Eater*, the sewer serves as a daunting maze. Nowhere was this aspect rendered more notoriously than in *Final Fantasy VIII*'s Deling City Sewers, a nightmare of split-up party members, identical rooms, locked gates and baffling waterwheel-riding mechanics. Sewers are filled with deadly water in games from *Blaster Master* to *Castlevania: Circle Of The Moon*; poison gases or foes in games from *Pokémon* to *Half-Life 2*; and hindering darkness in games from *Silent Hill* to *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*.

Videogame sewers can be useful for expanding a game world's sense of scale, serving as a cramped and dungeon-like underworld for a city's more spacious overworld without resorting to a fantasy setting. But ironically, the gritty realism that sewers provide is an illusion based on sheer fantasy, just like military-industrial complexes with volatile explosives lying around everywhere in the open. The labyrinthine engineering feats in games freely conflate the concepts of sanitary sewers, where human waste is jettisoned and storm drains siphon off rainwater from city streets. In reality, sanitary sewers are far too small for a person to fit into the pipes, much less go adventuring. They also show up in fantasy games ostensibly set long before the industrial revolution, with no toilets anywhere and palatial underground marvels to rival the Cloaca Maxima in Rome found beneath the shabbiest little villages.

Perhaps our videogame sewers succumb to fantasy because they were forged in fantasy. The rise of the console era of games coincided with the rise of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles mania and a generation of young geeks who saw sewers as thrilling places where Chelonian assassins wielded the sai and ate pizza with smoking-hot newscasters. Let's not forget that one of console gaming's first and most influential mascots was a plumber who leapt down sewer pipes to discover not pitch-dark corridors and filthy water but strange and magical lands.

The sewers in contemporary games may not be that whimsical, but they still require ample suspension of disbelief. It seems like we'll be sloshing around in them for as long as mazes-and-switches gameplay is in vogue. With the exception of superlative outliers such as *The Last Of Us*, the best you can hope for is that the relieved sigh of escaping a sewer is worth the exasperated groan of being sent into one. ■



Things

FABLE II'S DOG

The lovable canine that became Lionhead's best friend

Man's best friend doesn't play nearly as large a role in the plot in *Fable III*, though that game's hero does still have a dog. Faithful canines are to be sadly absent from Xbox One title *Fable Legends*

From *Fable II*
Developer Lionhead
Origin UK
Release 2008

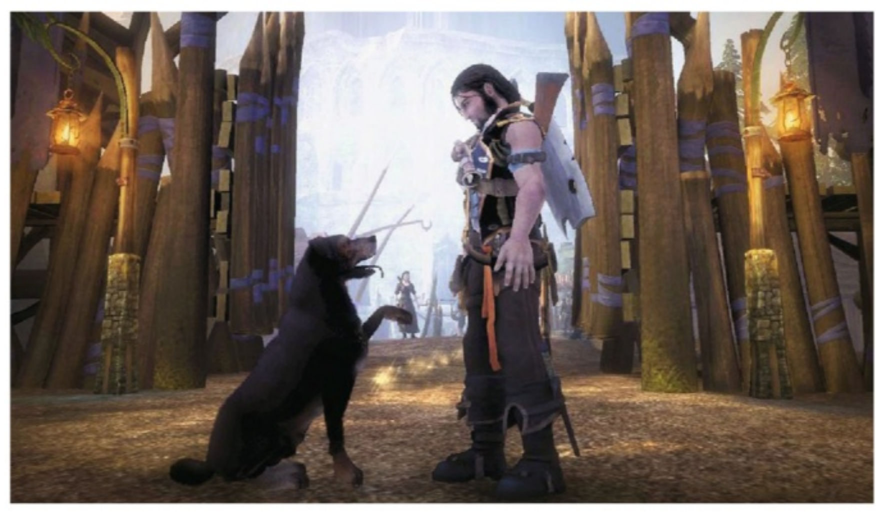
What makes you attached to an NPC – their function or their form? The death of Aerith in *Final Fantasy VII* was a narrative gut punch, but it was Square's audacious decision to rob you of a mid-level healer that truly made her passing a literal loss, one measured in lost experience points and wasted time. On the other hand, in *Fable II* Lionhead attempted to make us care about an NPC more than we ever had. But did you care about the dog because of its behaviour, animation and canine convincingness? Or because it was a useful four-legged tool?

Fable II's dog is the Hero's closest friend, their stalwart companion and adorable ally. It's a mirror of the Hero themselves, turning dark and shaggy should the player guide their champion down the path of wickedness, but sporting the glossiest coat, brightest eyes and wettest nose in all of Albion should they remain good-hearted and pure. But for all that Peter Molyneux insisted on selling the dog as a revolution in videogame storytelling, it's a direct and natural descendant of another NPC: Navi, Link's often irksome fairy companion from *Ocarina Of Time*.

When the Deku Tree bestowed Navi upon Link it wasn't really marking the young foundling's acceptance amongst the Kokiri, it was handing over a tool for navigating a 3D world. Navi's habit of flying over to key points of interest within Hyrule was a trait thoroughly bred into *Fable*'s four-legged friend, which would bark, snuffle and scratch at otherwise unmarked buried treasure across Albion's newly opened-out lands and growl when enemies came near.

In a way, *Fable II*'s dog provides the perfect compromise between the overtly functional nature of Navi and the major scripting and AI headache that would have been introduced had Lionhead attempted to work a human sidekick into the game. The dog's more alive, more animated, independent and adorable than Navi ever was, but it's still a dog, and as such much more immune to the uncanny valley effect than Albion's humanoid inhabitants. You're more likely to forgive repeated barks when they're coming from a dog, and it's easier to dismiss the occasional inscrutable, perhaps even misfiring, AI routine as illogical yet natural animal behaviour.

Even now, the dog's animation and behaviour is beautifully convincing. It's a scurrying, boundless ball of energy, this mutt, of indeterminate breed (unless you download some DLC) but border collie intelligence, with an astonishing array of tricks, from the believable rollover all the way to suspension-of-disbelief-pushing backflips.



Strictly speaking, the dog's lifespan is a bit of stretch, considering you grow from child to adult over the course of the game

Compare *Fable*'s dog to *Fallout 3*'s Dogmeat and you'll instantly know which puppy you want to take home. The *Fallout* engine's insistence on forcing you to interact with Dogmeat via the usual NPC conversation menu instantly makes your interactions seem stilted and formal – jokey even. The game's clunking animations, meanwhile, are never more seriously exposed than when Dogmeat robotically attempts to pathfind his way around a cluttered room. *Fable*'s dog moves naturalistically and has been brought to life with a panting, tongue-lolling attention to detail.

> Between this and Fallout 3's Dogmeat, you instantly know which puppy you want to take home

Crucially, you never control the dog directly, a decision which may end up making *Call Of Duty: Ghosts*' much-heralded Riley feel less like an autonomous yet loyal ally and more of a tool at your disposal. The illusion that the dog remains separate to you is strong in *Fable*: it bounds far and wide when given the room to explore, picks grounded enemies to finish off at its own leisure, and can even go missing for minutes at a time before its barks draw your attention to a seemingly innocuous patch of earth you need to dig up. It's separate yet influenced by you – and its increasingly good or bad behaviour (in conjunction with your own) reminds players that their decisions have an impact on others.

And then, after building a friendship that lasts the length of the game, the dog dies. The moment when your companion takes a bullet for you is choreographed with Hollywood-style melodrama, but it sets up the toughest moral decision in the series to date. *Fable* has always concerned itself with choices, but really only between good and evil. *Fable II* lets people choose to be weak.

Save the day in *Fable II* and the following, cartoonishly stark dilemma is presented to you: bring a bunch of the villains' victims back to life, or receive one million gold. Easy, right? Except there's a third choice, a rarity in *Fable*'s binary world: you can forgo the gold, and the thousands of lost souls, to bring your dog back to life.

It's a heartbreaking snare, forcing you to choose between the 'right' thing and your emotional connection to that furry bundle of unconditional love. It wouldn't work if *Fable II* hadn't succeeded in forging an emotional bond between the player and their canine friend. Yet the emotional impact of the decision is undermined by the dog's material purpose: forgo its return and you'll never find every piece of buried treasure in Albion, meaning practical concerns get muddled with what should be a strictly emotional decision.

The dog was so useful that Lionhead let players revive it in the game's first major DLC expansion, brutally undermining the ending and cheapening the player's sacrifice. It's a case study in narrative bumping up against design. With the dog, Lionhead finally made us care. But it also gave us a friend too useful to lose. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Sumo Digital

Proving risk-aversion and artistic credibility are not mutually exclusive, one of Britain's finest studios describes mastering the long game

1 Ulala from *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed*, Sumo's deceptively ambitious sleeper hit. 2 Sonic, AiAi and Alex Kidd, from Sumo's *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*. 3 A signature level of quality applied to brands defines *Moshi Monsters: Katsuma Unleashed*. 4 With Sumo's *Doctor Who: The Adventure Games*, the BBC has shown impeccable taste. 5 Rich in modes, *Virtua Tennis 3* is an example of Sumo rejecting the easy coin-op conversion. 6 *Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* treats a historic brand with respect

Sheffield's Sumo Digital has a reputation few seem to want – it's a safe pair of hands. Recently, though, it celebrated something even fewer would turn down: a tenth anniversary. That's ten years of making just about every stigmatised game type going for just about every platform. PSP ports (including its *OutRun* and *Virtua Tennis* arcade conversions), a Kinect fitness game (*Nike+ Kinect Training*), TV show tie-ins (*Doctor Who*), a family quiz game (*Hasbro Family Game Night 3*), and of course *Sonic The Hedgehog*, a franchise in crisis when Sumo's *Sonic & All-Stars Racing* series added – uh-oh – karting to the mix. Ten years, we should add, in which it has never made a bad game.

"A 'work-for-hire' studio: that's a cruel expression, really," begins managing director **Carl Cavers**, who together with studio director **Paul Porter** and art director Darren Mills founded the company in 2003, after years of running outfits like Infogrames and Gremlin Interactive. Design director **Sean Millard** joined a year later. "What we are is a content service provider – we provide creative content [for] everything and anything. The key thing is, what we do is *creative*. It may be working on existing IP, but there isn't anything we've released in the last ten years that's not been innovative in one way or another."

For a man who believes that "you're only as good as your last game", now is a good time to be saying it. *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* is the studio's biggest game to date, not to mention the best *Sonic* game of recent memory, and the most 'Sega-ish' Sega game since the Dreamcast era. Moreover, it's a feat of art and engineering to rival the most decorated triple-A, and terrific on Vita too.

"And this is what gets up my nose: people assume, because we're working with other people's IP all the time, that it's in some way less of a creative challenge," Millard says. "But if someone gives you a known universe with parameters to work with, to do the most creative thing you can to please the fans and the creator of the IP, as well as yourselves, it's way more of a challenge to work within those constraints, and in my experience a lot more enjoyable as well. If you start doing your own IP, there are so many hurdles: you've got to get so many people on board, and you end up firefighting and justifying. You exhaust yourselves with reasoning. The great thing about what we do is that we're commissioned to do a



One-time 'design overlord' Sean Millard has had to adopt mortal job titles of late, but his role is still tied to his passions

project with people who already believe in it, so half of the equation is done."

Sumo is enormously protective of both its staff and its partners, the latter ranking as high as Sony, Ubisoft, the BBC, Microsoft, and of course Sega. It's not a risk-taker – because the stakes, it believes, are too high.

"That's something I've always loved about it, particularly from a management point of view," Millard says. "[Sumo] was set up with the pillar being security, because too many of us have worked in insecure environments in the past in the industry. That really is one of the reasons we're still standing, because we were set up with security as a definite mindset. We wanted people to be able to depend on paying their mortgages at the end of the month. The enticement to do our own IP and strike out on our own – it's not against the grain exactly, but it's not what we're… " At this point, Cavers chimes in: "We're not there to place a bet that we can't honour. And if we can't honour it, the expense for us is that we let down 200 people in Sheffield, and there's no way we're going to do that."

"To be big, you don't have to be huge in terms of staff – you have to have an impact on the market"

So accomplished was Sumo's work with the home and handheld versions of *OutRun 2* – none of which is now available now, thanks to Ferrari licensing – that it could have become a racing boutique. It could have used its reputation to kickstart an original IP, and become the next Bizarre Creations or Black Rock. It chose to stay in business instead.

"The great thing about this industry is that it's full of opportunity," Cavers says. "As long as you're patient, opportunities come – and you can only be patient by being good. Looking at the changes at Sumo over the last ten years, the projects have become more high profile and the budgets have become bigger; the bets are slightly larger, but nothing we can't afford to cover. There's no reason to suspect that won't change over the next ten years. What we won't try and do, though, is force something, rush it and spoil it. If it takes another ten years for us to have an original hit or a great product that's recognised worldwide by everybody…

"*Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* was a great stepping stone in that direction: got great reviews, sold really well, but it still could have been better. We could have critiqued better, delivered better. There are many things we could do better, always. And I think over the next ten years we'll continue to improve and improve. Hopefully, in ten years' time we won't just be one of the biggest developers in the UK or Europe, but in the world," Cavers says.

Millard bristles. "Christ, we're not going to get that big, are we?"

Cavers isn't talking about team size, though. Sumo may have gone from being 12-strong at the beginning to 200-strong now, but, he says, "I don't think to be that big you have to be huge in number. What you have to do is have an impact on the market. To have an impact on the market, you really need to have market penetration in the US, and that's something we've lacked with what we've done in the past."

This might seem surprising when you consider that Sumo is such a prominent part of US conglomerate Foundation 9 Entertainment. Bought in 2007, and thus a stablemate of the like-minded Double Helix – a US studio consisting of The Collective and Shiny Entertainment, currently working on a handsome *Strider* remake – it owes much of its autonomy to co-founder James North-Hearn, who emigrated to become Foundation 9's CEO in 2008. The rest of it is down to the gentlemen sitting with us now, still as passionate



Founded 2003
Employees 200
Key staff Carl Cavers, Sean Millard, Darren Mills, Paul Porter
URL www.sumo-digital.com
Selected softography *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed, OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast, Doctor Who: The Adventure Games, Virtua Tennis 3*
Current projects TBA





The vanishing of Sumo's entries in the *OutRun* series (left) from shelves and online can be blamed on expired Ferrari licensing rather than its contractor, Sega. No such fate seems likely for *Nike+ Kinect Training*, however, which taps into the burgeoning health software genre

about games – not just the *business* of games – as they were 20 years ago.

"You see so many developers growing where the people who established the business – the entrepreneurs, the people who had the drive – move on to something else," Cavers says. "But the next group of people behind them don't have that same appetite. Sometimes they struggle and an organisation can lose its way. One thing we ensured wouldn't change [under Foundation 9] was our input into this organisation. We could have all said we wanted corporate roles, to work in the US, whatever. James was asked to go and run Foundation 9, which I think was a brilliant move in terms of recognition of what he could offer them. And from a Sumo point of view, because it meant we had someone in the US who got us straight away, it meant we could just get on with our day-to-day business without distractions, which has been fantastic. But none of us said, 'You know what, I want to go and do something bigger and better.' Because this, for us, has to be the biggest and best thing you can do. And what better industry to keep it going than in games, where things are always changing?"

Indeed, the roles at the top of Sumo are much the same as they've always been, as Porter explains. "The people at the company are still here doing exactly what they were doing when we started the company, which is just wanting to work on great IP making the best game we can make, which is the next game we're going to make. We started with 12 staff, and all 12 are still here. James kind of gets a pass because he's gone to the US."

"We're a team," says Cavers. "I might have a job title of managing director, Paul might be studio head, but we all have equal weight in terms of what is done and how we do it. We could not be here today if we were individuals. We couldn't tackle this kind of work – the bandwidth just wouldn't exist for you to succeed. We recognised that on day one. It wasn't, 'I'm going to start this – would you like to come on board?' It's always *we*. And that's the same thing throughout the whole culture. The team we have in Sumo, everybody has an equal voice. We have regular updates; we try to involve people as much as we possibly can in all the decision-making processes. It's by no means a cooperative or a committee, but we do listen to people, and we genuinely do take into account their views."

"We're a team. We could not be here today if we were individuals. We couldn't tackle this kind of work"

Unlike Valve, though, with its purportedly flat hierarchy, Sumo still believes in job titles. "We have them partly because our partners want to know who they're talking to," says Cavers. "It doesn't mean we have a different weighting to our voices. Valve's thing obviously works: it has a great organisation, it has established a great business. It just proves it's not 'one size fits all', it's got to be the best solution based on the people you work with, and the environment you're in."

Millard continues: "From our point of view, the [staff] want titles so they understand what their progression is going to be. That's the number one question: 'When will my job title change and what do I have to do to meet that goal?'" Cavers smirks: "You used to make up your own titles. How many have you had over the years?" "Four or five," shrugs Millard. "'Design overlord', anyone?" Porter laughs.

"But the actual hierarchy is completely flat – there's no such thing," Millard continues, gesturing towards Cavers. "He will bellyache when I go and interrupt him in a meeting, because he doesn't like me opening his door because he's shut it for a particular purpose. But generally speaking, anyone could walk in and talk to Carl, Paul, Darren…" "It's about whatever works for you," Cavers adds.

For students, in particular, Sumo is an arguably greater role model than the studios known by their IP and personalities. The 'who dares wins' mentality championed by people with nothing to lose, be they journalists or forum pundits, is rarely applied to studios that simply dare to make good games. That Sumo has done this over and over again on a wealth of platforms (*Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* is on seven), challenging cynicism with quality every time, provides a vital antidote to that day-to-day hyperbole.

"When we were doing *Doctor Who*, for a year and a half after we finished those first episodes, people were coming through the door on the strength of those games," Millard recalls. "We loved working with that. It's great working with the BBC. Where we're different is that we've got a varied fanbase depending on the IP we've been working on. Now we've got lots of Doctor Who fans who know about us who didn't know about us before. I like that – I like that we're not constrained to a reputation that hinges on a single genre or franchise. But it is more of a challenge. We've had conversations many times in the past about, if we do market ourselves, *how* do we market ourselves, because it's tangential."

"What we can't do is market ourselves at the expense of our partners," Cavers adds. "We work on a lot of really great IP with them, so we can't really determine what's said and when, and how. We make a contribution to that decision process but we don't manage it.

"We're not a PR-hungry studio, either. We take into account and cherish the fact that the publisher owns the IP, and owns the way that product is marketed and released. Our value is giving the end consumer the best possible gaming experience we can provide. We don't need to shout that: the end result is our baseline. We've been working with Sega for ten years, and although we are looked upon as custodians of the *All-Stars* brand, which was conceived here, it's not something that's happened overnight. We have a lot of support for what we do on forums, people are very nice [in] what they say, and they seem to trust Sumo handling an IP that's close to their heart for one reason or another. For us, that's as good a compliment as anything could ever be." ■



Darren Mills
Art director

Sumo's art director on the transition from outsourcing art tasks to setting up a proper India-based satellite studio.

Sumo's other studio is in India. What's the story behind that?
We set it up in 2007. We'd been using outsourcing for a while, had good and bad experiences, but felt that if we had more control over it we'd be in a better position. So we looked at potential places and ended up going to India. We decided to start small: the four of us got together and discussed beforehand how we were going to approach it. We'd put so much aside to have this bet, if you like, on how it would go. We hired three people and brought them here in January 2007. They worked in-house for six weeks, met the staff, learned what we were doing. They got involved in the projects we were working on and then went back to India. We put them on their own little project – I believe it was a DS project. Once the guys technically knew what they were doing it was a learning curve on either side to get that communication right, and we slowly started to expand.

Was communication an issue?
On both sides there was a lot of effort on getting that right. Sometimes things didn't work out as we planned: communication's really difficult [between] two countries, even when they speak English, because we don't speak the same English. They sometimes take things a little bit more literally than we intend. You can ask for one thing and get something you completely weren't expecting. But slowly we've found that balance. Certainly the guys here don't consider them to *be* an outsourcing studio, just a load of artists who happen to work in a different building, and the fact that it's in India is irrelevant. We don't split the kind of work we sent to India. There's no, "Oh, we'll just send all the props to India and we'll do the cool stuff." They do just as much of that as we do.

Including final submission assets?
In the early days, India could only work so far. They'd get to a point in the project where the final polish had to be done in Sheffield. That's not the case now with our new in-house tools and engine. Those guys can take assets right up to the point where they're dropped in-game and signed off. It has taken time to get there but we've got to the point where the initial vision was. It's been hard work but it's down to the people that have been involved.

How about the attrition rate?
The guys in India really believe in creating a solid studio. When we started we were told the attrition rate would be quite high. It's actually been extremely low, less than in Sheffield. The guys enjoy what they're doing. The fact that we respect their opinions, they work on the same stuff that we do, they work across all the platforms that we can in India… I think that's gone a long way. It's not a Foundation 9 studio – they're Sumo through and through.





Above (from left): Sumo MD Carl Cavers, co-founder (and Foundation 9 CEO) James North-Hearn, studio director Paul Porter and art director Darren Mills

THE MAKING OF…

TowerFall

How – despite some passport issues – one indie studio used gaming events to become Ouya's biggest success story to date

TowerFall has hovered at the top of Ouya's sales charts since the console's June launch, although that hasn't translated into massive returns. A PC version is in the works

Format Ouya, PC
Publisher Ouya
Developer Matt Thorson
Origin Canada
Release 2013

Alec Holowka and **Matt Thorson** needed to be on a plane to San Francisco in just one hour's time. The Vancouver-based indie devs were set to show off their game *TowerFall* at an IGN press mixer at the 2013 Game Developers Conference (GDC). Both knew how important it was that they make a good impression – this was a crucial shot at getting big publicity for the game. Thorson, *TowerFall*'s designer, had been working on the game for many months, putting extra effort into getting it ready for GDC.

Holowka was working intently at his desk when Thorson leaned into the room. "I just found out my passport expired," he said, "so I guess I can't go." Thorson shrugged and, without adding another word, calmly left the room. "That was him at his most frustrated," Holowka says. "Matt is the chillest dude I know. He doesn't get mad."

Holowka wound up taking *TowerFall* to the IGN event in Thorson's stead. It was a hit, and got its first big batch of press with a preview from the Penny Arcade Report that declared "*TowerFall* is Ouya's killer app". Other features followed, and the "killer app" label stuck.

Ouya's marketing team latched onto the buzz, and when the fledgling Android-powered game console finally launched, *TowerFall* was featured prominently in seven out of the nine categories on Ouya's virtual storefront. It became Ouya's best-selling game. Thorson is now working on a PC port, with planned updates for the Ouya version. Even if the game had failed, of course, Thorson probably wouldn't get mad.

Thorson and Holowka began working on *TowerFall* together as an entry in the 48-hour 2012 Full Indie Game Jam in Vancouver. The theme of the jam was 'alternate universes', but Thorson and Holowka paid no attention, instead building a singleplayer platformer with archery mechanics. "I didn't care about the theme at all," Thorson admits now.

The pair figured they could build the game out as a Flash game project with Adult Swim as a possible publisher. The pair had recently finished working on a game for the publisher called *Planet Punch* (in which enormous celestial bodies fight each other using planets as boxing gloves).

After the game jam, Thorson began focusing more exclusively on the game, and it became his personal project. Holowka watched as Thorson slowly tinkered and discovered what made the game interesting. "It was kind of weird for me," Holowka says. "This doesn't usually happen – that I'm working on something and then it goes off on its own."




Amora Bettany and Pedro Medeiros created *TowerFall*'s chunky pixel art style, which suits its old-school 4:3 format

Still, Holowka was close to the game at least in proximity. Thorson and Holowka live in a two-person apartment they share with two other Vancouver-based game developers: Chevy Ray Johnston (creator of *FlashPunk*) and Noel Berry (maker of *Prism Panic*).

The group christened the too-tiny apartment Indie House, and have used it as a base of operations for over a year. "We all crammed in there just trying to test and see if we could all get along," Holowka says.

Indie House became a gathering spot for *TowerFall* playtesters after Thorson began fooling around with adding a multiplayer mode to the game. Thorson ported the game to XNA because he wanted to test things using an Xbox controller, and invited some friends over to play. It quickly became clear that he had something interesting on his hands.

> The simplicity made the game a hit with more than just Ouya's execs; it's a hit at every event it appears at

Thorson couldn't be sure which parts of his game worked until he could see others interact with it, so his solution was to keep people playing his game constantly, especially at gaming events such as PAX and GDC. Events, Thorson says, are "completely vital" to an indie game's success. "*TowerFall* is built for longevity," he says, "so I think with the community my strategy has always been this slow buildup. I'm not looking to do this huge marketing push, not that I could even if I wanted to."

It was at an event, PAX East, Ouya rep and thatgamecompany alumni **Kellee Santiago** heard about the game. She offered Thorson a deal: advance funding in exchange for making *TowerFall* a timed exclusive for Ouya. Thorson agreed to the terms, citing Santiago's reputation in the industry as being the primary reason he took the chance with Ouya's new console.

Santiago had offered the deal to Thorson before ever playing the game herself, but when she finally got her hands on *TowerFall* she was impressed. "You used to come home from school with your friends and all play a game together on the couch, exploring the boundaries of a game at the same time," she says. "*TowerFall* was trying to capture that feeling."

"I like *TowerFall* because I feel like I'm good at it," Santiago says. "I've always been sort of a slower processor… you can probably tell from my games as a developer. If you compare it to *Smash Bros*, usually any game in that genre, I feel like it's way too chaotic, there's so much information on the screen."

The simplicity of *TowerFall*, the one-hit-kills and simple archery combat, made the game a hit with more than just Ouya's executives. The game is consistently a hit at any event Thorson brings it to.

When promoting *TowerFall* at events, Thorson's play has always been to hang back, not drawing too much attention to himself. He'd rather quietly observe than move in on people and try to make a sale. Holowka calls Thorson an introvert, but admits that he shares that trait. "We're a lot alike," he says. "We both like talking about the details of things, and thinking about possibilities. I think it's a designer thing."

Thorson has an oft-repeated catchphrase, Holowka says, that perfectly summarises his perpetually calm and considering demeanour: "I don't see why not".

"He says that so often, I can see it being on his tombstone," Holowka says. Holowka is quick to point out that this isn't indicative of a passive personality. "That's how he presents himself, but then he's going into his room and working intensely hard, making really sharp decisions about everything," he says.

That quality, Holowka says, is fairly common in the indie development scene. He mentions Adam Saltsman (*Canabalt*) and Derek Yu (*Spelunky*) as examples of devs with Thorson's personality type. "All three of those guys know what they want, and they know what's good," he says. "They know it really fast. You can show them something you're working on and they'll zoom in immediately on some aspect and say, 'This. This doesn't feel right.' It's something I respect a lot."

Pedro Medeiros and Amora Bettany, the husband-and-wife team that created the art for *TowerFall*, agree with Holowka's characterisation

of Thorson. "Matt knows what he wants and what's best for the game, but also respects our opinion and trusts us a lot," Medeiros says.

Before inviting Medeiros and Bettany, who run the game dev studio MiniBoss, to join as the artists, Thorson had already created a title for each character (The Assassin Prince, The Last Of The Order, The Turncloak Soldier and The Vigilante Thief) and had even written some background stories for them. Bettany liked them and drew up some chunky, cartoonish concept art, and Medeiros then developed the pixel sprites based on them.

Other than his initial direction, Thorson allowed Medeiros and Bettany free rein, stylistically. "I always end up adding a bit of darkness to the games I work on," Medeiros says. "I can't help hiding skulls everywhere, maybe a few hanged corpses. Amora likes to create expressive, mysterious characters and usually uses a lot of brownish colours and purple."

The dark, mysterious art jibed well with Holowka, who became the composer for the game after Thorson took over the project. Holowka decided to latch onto the theme of descension – arrows falling, towers falling – and sat at his keyboard adding slow, wavering and plummeting segments one layer at a time.

Holowka found himself wondering what a Game Of Thrones SNES game would sound like. He began listening to Celtic music and adopted the style, emulating it for *TowerFall*'s themes.

With the chunky pixel art style and 16bit Game Of Thrones soundtrack, *TowerFall* began to seem like yet another faux-retro game. The game is even formatted to display in 4:3. The game isn't meant to feel like a throwback, though, Thorson says. "The only thing really retro about the game is its resolution," he says.

The 4:3 thing, he says, was simply a level design decision. "If the levels fit a wider screen," he says, "they're just too big. It's not even an aesthetic decision; it comes down to gameplay."

Thorson did allow his design to take influence from plenty of classic games, of which perhaps the most obvious is the *Super Smash Bros* series, which Thorson says he's played for thousands of hours. He credits the Nintendo brawler for inspiring him to add the mid-air arrow-grab mechanic to *TowerFall*. "I found grabbing items out of the air in *Melee* to be really satisfying, although it was almost never a really good [thing] to do," he says. "It was so fun, but it was never the right move. In *TowerFall* I wanted to take that catching thing and make it the right move."



Matt Thorson
TowerFall designer

How important were events for raising awareness of *TowerFall*?
E3 was great for building awareness. I met tons of press contacts and had developers from Bungie and Naughty Dog try the game, then return with their co-workers for fourplayer matches. E3 was amazing from a business/networking perspective, but not really that interesting from a design/testing perspective because of its non-public nature.

EVO was perfect. The average skill level was very high and allowed me to put the game through its paces. I identified some small balance problems I've since addressed. Several players returned with valuable feedback. I began silently observing or playing with attendees, not making myself known as the developer. Knowing the developer is watching makes them play and react differently.

I missed GDC this year due to an expired passport. I had some friends take the game, and it was shown at the indie/press mixer at the IGN offices. It went extremely well. I sent out alpha builds to a bunch of other indies after GDC and buzz for the game started building.

I'm super excited for PAX – it's an honour to be in the PAX 10. I'm predicting the average skill level will be lower than at EVO so I can test the game's pick-up-and-play side more. I also have new content for *TowerFall Luna* – the PC release – that I want to get into players' hands.

Thorson adds that other games held a strong influence as well, "particularly *GoldenEye*, for how silly it is". He laughs and recalls those moments when two players circle each other endlessly, hosing one another with countless bullets. "*GoldenEye* is a really stupid game, when you think about it," he observes.

Thorson thinks *GoldenEye* was good *because* of its "stupid" bits. "The beauty of local multiplayer is that the game doesn't even have to be that good," he says. "If it is good, that's amazing, but I remember playing the worst GameCube games with friends and having the best time."

It's the small touches, the silly little details that you notice and can point out to a friend, that make a game more endearing to players, Thorson believes. He began intentionally adding little touches that would make *TowerFall* more conducive for comedy, making it so that corpses fly around after they've been hit, and allowing arrows to graze a character's head and knock their hat off. "When I added that, people just went crazy," Thorson says.

Thorson is especially proud of the slow-motion replays *TowerFall* displays after the final kill in any particular match. "It just multiplies the effect, because everybody gets to see all the little details at once," he says.

Thorson felt good about his experience working with the Ouya team, and was especially happy with the hands-off approach they showed towards devs. Kellee Santiago says that's one of Ouya's core rules. As part of her role at Ouya, she gives free consultation to developers working on the platform, but notes that she never makes it her job to try to influence the design or direction of a game. "No one is more motivated to make a great game than the developer," she says. "Any publisher that puts themselves in there with the idea that they know better… that's just egotism, more than anything."

Still, Thorson says that knowing what he knows now, he wouldn't make another Ouya-exclusive game. "The game recouped all of what they funded me, and it's already pretty profitable," he says. "But it worked for *TowerFall* for very specific reasons. I would encourage devs to launch on Ouya, I just don't think I would encourage devs to go Ouya-exclusive."

Holowka isn't nearly so blunt about his opinion of the $100 game console, saying that "the only really positive thing I can think of about the Ouya launch is *TowerFall*". Holowka calls it "kind of a shame" that *TowerFall* is still only available on the platform, and points to low sales figures for developers. For now at least, Holowka agrees that no one should want to make an Ouya-exclusive title.

"*TowerFall* is the top-selling game on the Ouya," he says. "People are talking about 'game of the year' and stuff. That kind of game doesn't come along all the time, and it's not doing very well." Holowka is willing to forgive Ouya for the somewhat slow start it's had, but is frustrated with the way the company has promoted itself. "Their marketing is crap," he says. "It almost seems like they're from the '90s. 'This is crazy and extreme! Blah!' It's sloppy, and their damage control is really obvious. It feels like Matt takes it more seriously than they do."

Santiago, at least, is taking Ouya's future very seriously. She maintains that there will be another *TowerFall*, or at least a game of similar calibre, coming to the console soon enough. "We've got some stuff," she says, "and, as our audience continues to grow, it'll become more attractive from the business side." ■



Each of the four playable archer characters shown here looks totally different to the others, but Thorson designed them to play identically to one another. The colourful aesthetic differences are just "so that players could attach to one and assign personalities to them," he explains



Sound defect

Particularly sneaky glitches and bugs often stow away into release builds of games and can sometimes take on a life of their own. A few weeks after the launch of *TowerFall* on Ouya, Thorson discovered a bug that allowed players to alternately grab and let go of ledges very quickly, causing the ledge-grab sound effect to trigger dozens of times per second. Word of the bug spread, and players (including Thorson) began using the technique as a taunt, hanging out near ledges and drowning out all other game sound with the machine gun-like noise of the glitch. Thorson intentionally left the glitch in the game because the noise was so annoying that it worked well as a taunt; other players would rush the player performing the ledge-grab taunt, hurtling themselves into combat just to stop the taunting. He intends to put real taunts in the game eventually. "It's been on the list forever, but it's mostly low-priority because it would take a lot of graphic and sound work."



***TowerFall*'s riotous popularity at events such as the Game Developers Conference led to it gaining wider mainstream exposure**



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The meta-conversation

The world of English literature uses the phrase 'intentional fallacy' to mean believing that you can know what an author meant in writing something based on exterior information. A common example would be learning that JRR Tolkien fought at the Somme and inferring that Middle-earth was an allegory about the First and Second World Wars.

Invoking the intentional fallacy is generally considered bad. But in the more fluid universe of culture we cannot avoid the stories of authors. We want to know who Shakespeare was and what hijinks Hunter S Thompson got up to. We tend to ascribe mythical qualities to makers' lives and turn them into heroes of a larger tale. They inspire us and, in wanting to be closer to them and their works, we conflate the two. It's not enough to say that Jim Morrison happened to write songs; we have to turn him into a story. And we draw connections in so doing. The maker and the thing he makes become indivisible.

That meta-conversation takes on a life of its own. On social networks and blogs people talk about the narrative of media, whether being appalled by Miley Cyrus or re-energised by the latest DeLillo novel. They perennially ask whether we are approaching the death of the novel, and just as commonly refute the suggestion. And all of the above is just as true of games.

Consider *The Last Of Us*. It's a tour de force of design and production, of style and substance. It's fun, dark, morally ambiguous. Between its combat, crafting, skill, resource management and map design it's got a lot going on. It's also very ambitious in terms of its story. Like many high-end games it's heavily influenced by film, using cutscenes, alongside dialogue, discoverables and quick-time events, to paint an image of a world and an urgency within it. The game takes time to develop strong character voices as a part of that and then crafts tasks that reinforce those relationships. Is it ultimately successful?

For an audience already reading intentions and participating in the meta-conversation, it is. The audience is predisposed to hear that message and it responds. And therein lies a danger for meta-conversations and the reason they must always be challenged.



If we only ever serve the meta's interests then we end up making games for a niche audience that hates change

The conversation around games is often circular because it's based on belief in the future. It begins with an article of faith – because games are interactive they are better than passive media – and then extrapolates from there. What follows is often closer to theology than critique.

If you accept this games axiom, then it follows that controlling Joel and Ellie creates a more powerful connection than if you were simply watching them in a story on a screen. Irrespective of the quality of acting, technique, interruptions to attention or whatever, that becomes the reasoning. If you accept the axiom, you must accept that the combination of cutscene and quick-time event is the most emotionally impactful because it is supposed to be.

Logic dictates that when the player loses his daughter at the start of the game it must be emotionally meaningful, more so than all the other times games have used the same device. The future axiom mandates that it must be so. When finding yourself as Joel assaulting a hospital to rescue Ellie, even though she's the potential saviour of mankind, it must be a Great Moment. So too the lie Joel tells at the end.

But there are other views, ones that start with not being aware of the meta-conversation. The person who plays one game a year after everyone else, for example. For them the experience can be quite different. These are the people for whom the artifice of a modern game may seem baffling. They are the ones who interpret 'significant' role reversals as the game just repeatedly cheating her of her loot. Or for whom quick-time events are basically trial-and-error tests that lose their appeal quickly. Where a tuned-in player might delight at the bravura of Ellie's character, another might find her interesting in glimpses, repetitive at others.

I'm not picking on story, or *The Last Of Us*, but rather talking about the role of a wider culture in the estimations of how great a game is. The inner workings of the *Minecraft* community are just as significant to understanding that game as for *The Last Of Us*. So too what goes on in the Steam indie scene. *Papers, Please* is not necessarily fun unless you're plugged into the wider conversation.

Meta-conversations and the intentional fallacy are both impossible to avoid and key aspects of the joy of games. To enthuse about a game on Twitter is an important experience that brings both the game and the community closer together. But we should always remain aware of the potential for the meta-conversation to spin out of control.

As game makers, if we only ever serve the meta's interests then we end up making games for a niche audience that hates change, spending all of our time listening to the same voices. It's worth remembering those who don't participate and making sure that a game is still fun for them, even if they don't get our ten layers of meaning. It is they who keep the conversation alive.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Games about people

Sometimes I wonder why there are not more games about people. The first racing game I ever remember playing was *Turbo* (Sega, 1981). There had been racing games before it, but to my knowledge *Turbo* was the first game to use a simulated vanishing point and scaling sprites to give the impression of a three-dimensional view of a race track. It also featured signs and other cars, a simulation of hills that concealed oncoming cars from view, and parallaxing landscape in the distance. As amazing as it was at the time, in the more than 30 years that have passed since then, racing games have become more sophisticated and complex by many orders of magnitude.

Ignoring the huge difference between modern 3D game engines and the clever graphical trickery used in *Turbo*, modern racing games include dozens of race courses, multiple racing modes, and hundreds of unique vehicles, each with hundreds of simulated parameters. *Turbo* had one car with what appeared to be three simulated parameters: acceleration and top speed, both of which were dependent on the third parameter, the high/low gear setting.

A modern racing game might simulate thousands of parameters for a given vehicle, and virtually all of them could be interdependent. Acceleration is not simply a function of gear selection and the vehicle's horsepower, but also depends on (among other things) the total weight of the vehicle, which is in turn partially dependant on the amount of fuel in the tank. The simulation of wear on the vehicle's tyres over the course of a race might affect the frictional coefficient between the tyre and the road surface. If the track has more right turns than left – or the opposite – tyre wear will be uneven and the difficulty of executing turns in one direction will increase over time at a different rate than the difficulty of executing turns in the opposite direction.

Now, we could go on talking about racing games and their sophisticated simulations all day. We could do the same for games about planes or cities, or for games about guns or armies – but that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about games about people. A couple of years after *Turbo* achieved success, Atari released a



With the exception of The Sims, I cannot name a game that richly simulates dynamic interpersonal relationships

game called *Gossip* (1983), designed by Chris Crawford. *Gossip* never made it into an arcade cabinet, and I have never played it, but from what I've read *Gossip* was similar to *Turbo* in the sense that it offered a very simple simulation of only a few interdependent parameters.

Rather than modelling the physical properties of its characters, it modelled the characters' opinions of one another. The game tracked how much each character liked or disliked every other character, and how much each character's opinion of the other characters changed based on their knowledge of the other characters' feelings about each other. The player and the AI characters would exchange information about their feelings toward other characters (they would gossip), modifying the matrix of relationships. AI characters were motivated to minimise the tension in their relationships, which was basically the difference between an ideal steady state and the current state of the simulation. Admittedly, this is a more complex system than that of *Turbo*, but if *Turbo* had simulated seven AI racers, each with a unique desire to see the race end with a particular finishing order for all eight cars, plus a player who wanted to be first, then the games would have been conceptually identical. So the difference between *Turbo* and *Gossip* is really not that large.

Yet in the 30 years that have passed since these two games were released, racing games have become several orders of magnitude richer and more interesting, while games about people have stagnated. With the exception of *The Sims*, I cannot name a single game that richly simulates dynamic interpersonal relationships and motivates AI characters to optimise the state of those relationships. *The Sims* is not to be disregarded, but it is a single game. Racing games are an entire genre. What's more, vehicle simulations are important components in many other genres.

While it's true that the vehicle simulation in *Battlefield* is not as sophisticated as the vehicle simulation in a racing game, it is still an important component of the entire experience. Napoleon stated that morale was three times more important than physical might in determining the outcome of a battle. Yet the simulation of interpersonal dynamics in a *Battlefield* game – which would affect everything from morale and unit cohesion to communication efficacy and robustness of the chain of command – is deemed irrelevant.

It's clear that today we could not release a 'game about people' that overleaps three decades of design iteration and delivers a game that is to *Gossip* what *Forza* is to *Turbo*. The gap is too large. There are too many experiments to undertake and too many failures to celebrate along the way. What I don't understand is why we don't *try*. There is an entire genre waiting to be developed, the potential for the kinds of games we can make in this genre is enormous, and the potential cultural value of these games is immeasurable.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve Software. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Is the future story-led games that aim to be totally different?

By the time you read this, *GTAV* will be out, and you'll be raving about it to everyone in earshot. The acting, the realism, the immersive detail and the sheer scale of the thing will be keeping you awake at night, even if you're not actually on the sofa playing it.

The game is expected to take interactive storytelling to a new level, both in terms of the heist 'plots' and the sheer quality of the animation and voice acting. And frankly all the adulation will almost certainly be highly deserved. I'd have given my right arm to have had both hands on this one while they were developing it.

Also by the time you read this, the long-running AMC TV show Breaking Bad will have finished. You'll probably be raving about that as well. The shocking twists and turns of the storyline, the astonishing acting, the sheer bravery of doing telly differently – the blurring of the lines between good and bad, the smartness of the plotting and the effective use of cold openings, as well as symbolism, colour and foreshadowing.

No matter how well a game is put together, there is so much of the Breaking Bad-style satisfying narrative stuff which simply can't be included. Foreshadowing on the small screen simply looks like tramlining in a game. Symbolism looks like the seeding of clues for the eagle-eyed player to spot. Colour? Who really looks at the colour of things in games? It's only important if it's glowing and surrounding an oversized chicken drumstick, which will, of course, upon ingestion, mend serious gunshot wounds.

Great acting? Yes, that still helps. *GTAV* will bear this out (I hope). And this is totally achievable. Don't sit the VO people down in a booth. Have them stand in a studio. Everyone who's in a scene does this. They have read the scene, they know it (not necessarily word for word), and they have rehearsed the scene together. They know what it's meant to achieve and how it fits into the greater picture of the game. And they act it, as a take, with as many movements and gestures as they can get away with before microphones get their plugs torn out and things get broken. This is filmed and the animators base as much of the characters' moves and expressions as they can on what they see when they replay the footage. Yes, yes, like Pixar and all those film guys do.



No matter how well a game is put together, much of the Breaking Bad-style satisfying narrative can't be included

Of course, all this adds time and cost to the development schedule, and because the result is often more cohesive and natural, it can also impact on later changes and pick-ups. The manageability of individual lines which can be chopped up into computer-friendly chunks and altered and replaced with ease is compromised, but the result is well worth it. Probably. Breaking Bad cost an eye-watering $3 million per episode, by the way. Just so you know.

Hey, forget that. Put the calculator down. The way forward might be not to emulate the processes used by the big-money guys. Perhaps making story-led games which aim to be totally different is the future. There is a company called Upper One Games which is doing just that. They are, it seems, the first Native American studio and they're aiming to infuse all their product with the unique culture of the peoples of Alaska. This is clearly worthy, and their goal of dismantling the classic stereotypes of Eskimos with a hundred words for snow is laudable.

Ah, but what I'm truly interested in, because I'm shallow, is the way that the first game looks truly, epically cinematic and yet seems to be steering away from the world of glossy cinematicism in its storytelling. It's about an Inupiat (me neither) girl trying to survive all the Arctic can throw at her by drawing on the wisdom of her forebears. Myths, legends and humour all get thrown into the mix, and while this looks to be far from an interactive documentary, it also appears very far away (in a northerly direction) from the Hollywood-aping games I always seem to be banging on about here.

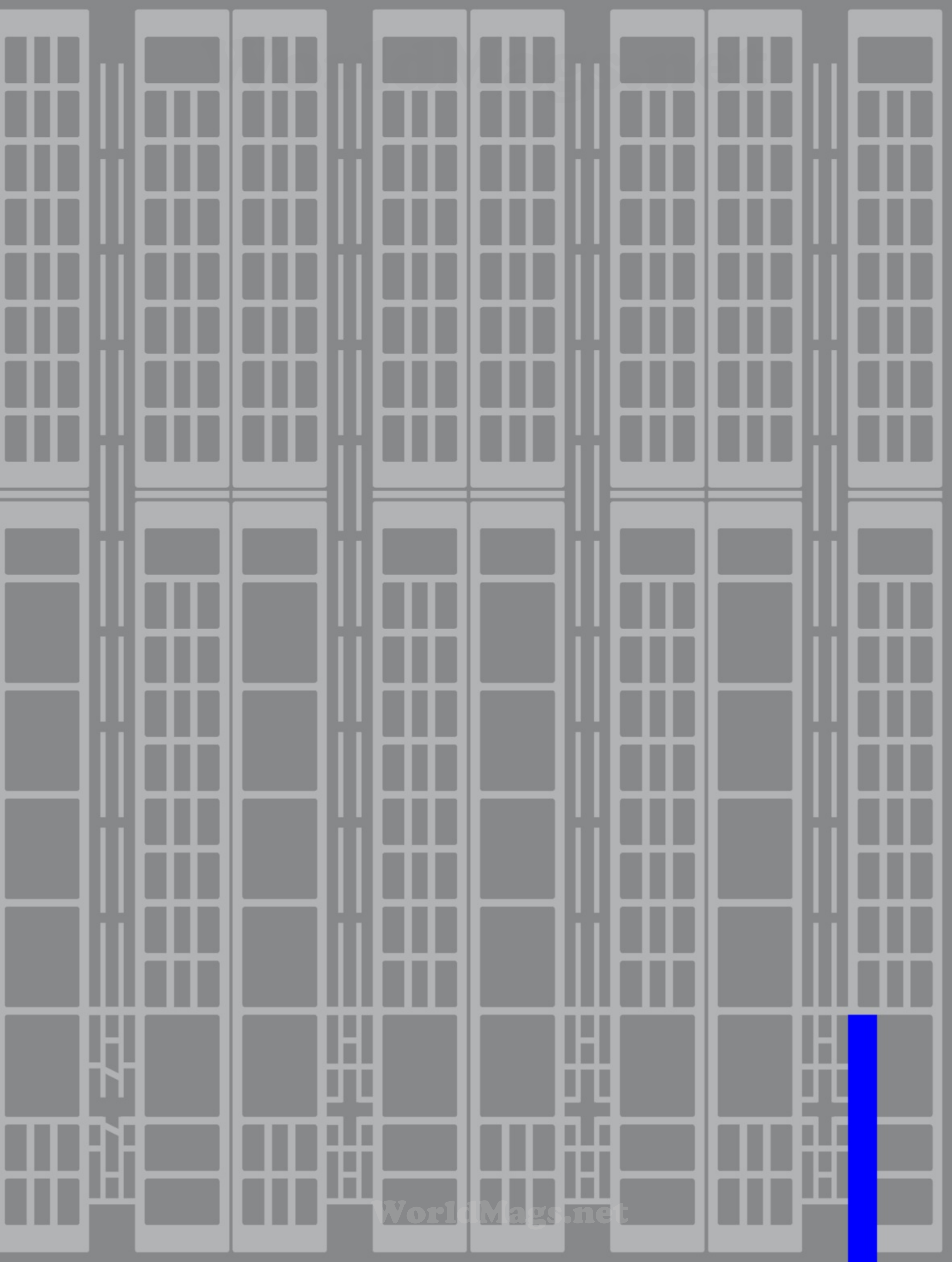
The trouble facing Upper One (whose name I've just understood; they're not part of the lower 48 US states) is that we want our games to be cool. And we think cool is flashy cars and slick one-liners and hip, finger-clicking violence. We don't buy games to be educated, and if there's a hint of that, we'll stick on a movie instead. The developers have done a ton of research and if they can pull amazing engrossingness from the giant history-pit of Native Alaskan culture, and can turn that into a game I damn well want to finish, I will rejoice in it and its difference.

For too long the neatest ideas seem to have been born in the smaller companies and have appeared on mobile devices. *GTA*, with its variants, now number over 100 discs, thus proving that if it ain't broke (and if the developers certainly ain't broke), then don't fix it. But with *GTAV* costing a reported £163 million, you can see why Rockstar wants it to be as movie-like as possible. It makes $3 million for each Breaking Bad episode seem tiny. And that's dollars. So I wish it well, but I also want to see the as-yet-unnamed Arctic Inupiat game win as well. Oh, and I want the moon on a stick too.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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